EMPOWERING THE CHURCH FOR HEALING: A WORKSHOP MODEL FOR GRIEF MINISTRY DEVELOPMENT

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A FINAL PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY
Dayton, Ohio
May 2026

United Theological Seminary
Dayton, OH

Faculty Approval Page
Doctor of Ministry Final Project

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ABSTRACT

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This project focused on developing a grief support and recovery ministry at Sandy Ridge AME Zion Church in Landis, North Carolina. It proposed that if a selected group of lay leaders participated in an educational workshop on the fundamentals of grief, they would be equipped to design and operate an effective grief ministry. The training aimed to strengthen cognitive understanding, emotional awareness, and behavioral readiness, ensuring leaders are prepared to offer compassionate, informed support. By enhancing these capacities, the project sought to establish a sustainable ministry that met the congregation's needs and fostered holistic healing within the church community. Project effectiveness was measured through a mixed-methods evaluation using pre- and post-

workshop surveys, weekly participant journals, and semi-structured interviews to assess changes in cognitive, emotional, and behavioral readiness for grief-support ministry.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, giving honor to God, who is indeed the joy and the strength of my life. I thank Him for giving me the strength and ability to complete this journey. I want to thank United Theological Seminary. The faculty and staff were fantastic in every intensive session. They challenged and pushed me through this process to produce the best work possible. I am also grateful to United because it was through this institution that God blessed me with the opportunity to become acquainted with some of the most powerful pastors and preachers in the country. None is more powerful than my three mentors: the Reverend Doctor Phillip L. Pointer Sr., the Reverend Danielle L. Brown, and the Reverend Doctor Charles E. Goodman, Jr. To be a part of the Pointer, Brown, Goodman cohort has been by far the best decision I have made. To have gleaned from three of the finest pastors, most powerful preachers, innovative thinkers, and scholars has been a joy. The impact that the three of them have had on my ministry is immeasurable.

To my cohort, "The Fabulous Fifteen," with whom I had been blessed to build life-long relationships. This is a collection of some of the brightest and kindest people ever assembled. We have seen each other through so many life changes, deaths of loved ones, job loss, sickness, and even marriage. We have laughed together, cried together, and encouraged one another. We are not just an academic cohort; we are a family. "No One Left Behind" was not just our cohort mantra; it became our life. The passing of one

of our own, Reverand Derrick T. Jones, was a devastating blow. But together we emerged stronger, closer, and more determined to cross the finish line together.

To my peer associates, Reverend Quavon Newton and Reverend Demond Hairston, thank you for the conversations, the encouragement, and just constantly checking in. You are not just my brothers in a fraternal sense, but also emotionally and spiritually. To my professional associates, Dr. Amanda Macon, Reverand Doctor George Banks, and Dr. Maisha Kelly Freeman. Thank you for your assistance in making the project a reality. Your expertise across various areas was a tremendous help.

To the greatest church anywhere, the Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church. I appreciate your support throughout this process. I am blessed to partner with you in life and ministry. It is indeed a “Wonderful Time to be A Part of The Ridge.”

Finally, to my family. Tina, thank you for your support. My mother, Mrs. Lozona Doyle Tate, encouraged me every step of the way and made me feel special to be your son. You have been a very constant presence in my ministerial growth from the very beginning. In many ways, you have been a constant source of strength. To my brother, Tre Carter Tate, who encouraged me as well. You have kept me motivated in ways you will never know. I am proud to be your little brother. I love you both.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my parents, Marlin Carter Tate, Jr., and Lozona Doyle Tate. Mom, you are the strongest person that I know. You have faced and overcome things that many others could not. There were times when I knew that you felt like giving up, but you did not. You are a true survivor, and I love you. My father was my first role model and hero. I never got a chance to tell him. He was my junior high school principal. Little did I know that I would one day walk in the same career path as he, teaching, coaching high school football, and then going into school administration. His sudden passing and my grieving process are the inspiration for this work. Dad, I love you and miss you every day. Finally, to my ace, my heartbeat, and my "reason," Kennedy Olivia Tate. Sweetheart, I want you to know that you are the greatest joy of my life. Your best interests have been the focus of every professional decision I have ever made. You are the greatest gift and blessing that God has ever given to me. I am so very proud of you. I thank God every day that he has allowed me to be your dad. Thank you for being the best daughter any father could have ever dreamed of. I love you so very much. I pray that in some small way, this work has made you all proud.

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INTRODUCTION

Grief is a universal human reality, yet the ways individuals and communities respond to loss are shaped by culture, history, theology, and lived experience. Within the Black Church, grief has often been carried collectively, interpreted theologically, and expressed through worship, ritual, lament, and community care. Nevertheless, many congregations lack structured, intentional ministries to support members navigating grief in its many forms. The need for such ministries is particularly acute in contemporary contexts, where loss is multilayered—encompassing death, trauma, fractured relationships, economic instability, health crises, and the generational wounds passed down within African American communities. As congregants experience these realities, churches are increasingly called to respond in ways that are biblically grounded, theologically sound, psychologically informed, and pastorally compassionate.

This dissertation explores the development, implementation, and evaluation of a grief support and recovery ministry within Sandy Ridge AME Zion Church in Landis, North Carolina, a congregation with deep historical roots and an ongoing commitment to holistic spiritual care. The project arose from the pastoral observation that members often experience profound grief yet lack structured pathways for support beyond funerals, pastoral visits, and informal encouragement, coupled with my own grief experience with the loss of my father. While the traditional forms of care remain valuable, they are insufficient for addressing the long-term emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual

needs of those navigating grief. The absence of structured support often results in congregants suffering silently, isolating themselves, or struggling with unresolved grief that impacts their spiritual growth, emotional well-being, and relationships.

Recognizing this gap, the researcher designed and facilitated an eight-week grief support and recovery training workshop aimed at equipping a team of lay leaders to create and operate a formalized grief ministry within the church. This participatory educational intervention sought to strengthen the congregation's capacity to provide sustained, competent, compassionate care to those experiencing loss. The workshop grounded participants in biblical and theological foundations, historical and communal understandings of grief, and interdisciplinary insights from psychology, pastoral care, and grief theory. In addition, it emphasized the practical skills necessary for effective grief ministry, including active listening, empathy, presence, confidentiality, and long-term support practices.

To assess the effectiveness of the workshop, the study employed a mixed-methods design incorporating pre- and post-workshop surveys, weekly reflective journal entries, and individual semi-structured interviews. These instruments were used to evaluate participant development across three key domains essential for grief support ministry: cognitive readiness, emotional readiness, and behavioral readiness. Cognitive readiness refers to the participant's understanding of grief processes, ministry principles, and theoretical frameworks. Emotional readiness reflects the participant's capacity to regulate emotions, demonstrate empathy, recognize personal grief triggers, and remain present with others' pain. Behavioral readiness denotes the observable actions, skills,

and ministry behaviors participants demonstrate as they apply workshop content in real-life contexts.

Through this triangulated data collection process, the study sought to evaluate whether the structured workshop effectively prepared lay leaders to engage in grief ministry and to identify areas of strength, growth, and continued need. This approach acknowledges that ministry readiness is not solely a matter of knowledge acquisition; rather, it is a complex integration of learning, reflection, emotional maturity, and practical application. By examining all three dimensions, the study offers a comprehensive picture of participant development and ministry preparedness.

The guiding hypothesis for this project was: If a group of lay leaders participates in an educational workshop about the fundamentals of grief, then they will be equipped to create and operate a grief support and recovery ministry. This hypothesis was evaluated through pre- and post-intervention assessments across the three constructs of ministry readiness.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it addresses a pastoral and communal need within a specific congregational context but reflects a broader need within many African American churches. The findings may serve as a model for other congregations seeking to establish similar ministries.

Second, the project integrates biblical, theological, historical, and interdisciplinary foundations, offering a holistic model of grief ministry that recognizes both the spiritual and emotional dimensions of grief. This integrated approach aligns with the AME Zion Church's tradition of caring for the whole person—mind, body, and spirit.

Third, this study contributes to the field of practical theology by demonstrating how structured educational interventions can prepare lay leaders for specialized ministries. Many churches rely heavily on clergy to provide grief care, yet effective grief ministry requires a collective effort. Training lay leaders expands the ministry capacity of the congregation and ensures that grieving individuals have consistent support.

Finally, the use of triangulated qualitative data—surveys, interviews, and weekly journaling—provides a robust model for evaluating ministry interventions in church contexts. This methodological approach helps ensure that the development of the ministry is grounded in actual participant experiences and demonstrated growth.

The introduction of a grief support and recovery ministry at Sandy Ridge AME Zion Church reflects the congregation's identity as a caring community committed to holistic healing. The training workshop at the heart of this study sought to equip lay leaders with the knowledge, emotional maturity, and practical skills required to serve effectively in this ministry. By evaluating their development across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains, this project provides insight into how churches can prepare ministers—both clergy and laity—to accompany individuals through the complex journey of grief.

The chapters that follow will present the biblical, theological, historical, and interdisciplinary foundations for this project, outline the research design and implementation strategy, and present the findings of the data analysis. Together, these components demonstrate the transformative potential of equipping the church to serve as a place of healing, hope, and compassionate presence for those who grieve.

This document is organized in six chapters. Chapter One (Ministry Focus) describes the context of Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church, clarifies the ministry challenge created by compounded loss, and introduces the purpose and design of the workshop intervention. Chapter Two (Biblical Foundations) examines key biblical texts that ground the church's call to lament, comfort, and compassionate presence. Chapter Three (Historical Foundations) considers the historical realities and communal grief that shape the Black church's pastoral response to suffering. Chapter Four (Theological Foundations) outlines the theological frameworks—such as the theology of the cross, theology of hope, and liberation theology—that inform this project's understanding of healing. Chapter Five (Interdisciplinary Foundations) synthesizes major grief theories and helping practices that guide healthy support and recovery. Chapter Six (Project Analysis) presents the workshop implementation, data collection methods, findings, and ministry implications for sustaining grief care at Sandy Ridge.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

Introduction

Harold G. Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago, Illinois. He had a wife, Anna, and five children. However, tears and tragedy were not foreign to him. In 1871, the Spaffords lost their son to pneumonia. That same year, he lost most of his business in the Chicago fire. Two years later, he and his wife planned a cruise to Europe on the French ocean liner Ville du Havre. Unexpectedly, a business emergency arose, and he could not travel with his family. He encouraged them to continue as planned, and he joined them later in Europe. Four days into the trip, the Ville du Havre collided with the Loch Earn, an influential Scottish ship. Within twelve minutes, the Ville du Havre sank into the deep, dark waters of the Atlantic Ocean.[1] All two hundred twenty-six passengers, including Anna and the four Spafford children, died.[2]

A sailor, rowing a boat over the area where the ship sank, noticed a woman floating on a piece of the wreckage. He pulled her to safety in his boat. It was Anna. She had survived, but her four children had not. They were later picked up by another large vessel. It is recorded that in Spafford's office, there was a framed telegram sent by his wife that began, “Saved alone. What shall I do?” Later, Anna would say, “God gave

[1] The St. Augustine Record, “Story Behind the Song: It is Well with My Soul,” The St. Augustine Record, https://www.staugustine.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2014/10/17/story-behind-song-it-well-my-soul/985525007/.

[2] The St. Augustine Record, “Story Behind the Song: It is Well with My Soul,” The St. Augustine Record, https://www.staugustine.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2014/10/17/story-behind-song-it-well-my-soul/985525007/.

me four daughters. Now, they have been taken from me. Someday, I will understand why." Spafford took the next available ship to be with his grieving wife.[3]

Spafford was called to the captain's cabin four days into his journey. The captain informed Spafford that they were over the place where the Ville du Havre went down. Spafford walked to the top of the ship and looked around. Later, while in his cabin, he began thinking about God's grace. He took out a writing utensil and paper and wrote these words, "When peace like a river attendeth my way, When sorrows like sea billows roll, Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say, It is well, it is well with my soul."[4]

Today, "It is Well With My Soul" has become one of the bedrock hymns of Methodism. It has often been sung at Homegoing services. This song resonates with people who are dealing with grief.

This work will examine the context of Sandy Ridge AME Zion Church. Sandy Ridge is a historically Black Church on the crossroads of China Grove and Landis, North Carolina. Sandy Ridge has an illustrious history. Both former bishops and Presiding Elders have pastored there, while retired General Officers of the denomination have called Sandy Ridge home. Sandy Ridge has always been one of the most vital members of the Salisbury District. Over the recent years, there has been a shift in the congregation.

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[3] The St. Augustine Record, "Story Behind the Song: It is Well with My Soul," The St. Augustine Record, https://www.staugustine.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2014/10/17/story-behind-song-it-well-my-soul/985525007/.

[4] The St. Augustine Record, "Story Behind the Song: It is Well with My Soul," The St. Augustine Record, https://www.staugustine.com/story/lifestyle/faith/2014/10/17/story-behind-song-it-well-my-soul/985525007/.

Over the last three to four years, Sandy Ridge has been devastated by the number of deaths it has faced. These deaths have left a deep residue on the souls of the surviving family members. Some members are struggling with the idea of going on without their loved ones. This has influenced ministry. Many members have felt as if their faith has been shaken and, in some instances, shattered. It becomes essential to have a ministerial process in place to help facilitate healing. This is an essential piece to the continual growth of the Sandy Ridge Church.

I have examined the context and considered my ministry interests and skills. I have a passion for preaching God's word. I also have a deep desire to see God's people whole, as one who once upon a time wrestled with grief while pastoring; I have a keen understanding of the difficulties of ministering while grieving. My experience in this has made me empathetic to the struggles of those who grieve. The synergy of my context and my spiritual journey was found in healing from grief. My goal in this work is to examine the need for recovery from grief and create a culture in which those wrestling with grief can find refuge and ministry for their wounded souls.

There is a cohort of members at Sandy Ridge AME Zion who are still wrestling with grief. Some members have lost loved ones as long ago as three years, while others have lost them as recently as two months ago. The challenge is to move them from hurt to healing so they can effectively minister to others. The hypothesis is that if a group of laity and leaders who experienced the recent loss of a loved one are moved to a place of healing, then they will embody compassion, thus making them more prepared for ministry.

Context

Landis is a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina, with a population of 3,610. Landis is a rural area in Rowan County. The town of Landis, North Carolina, was incorporated on March 7, 1901. Primarily a farming community, local farmers and invested community members, including the Linn, Corriher, Deal, and Coltrane families, worked together to establish the town. The median home value is $177,100, and the average median rent is $750. Both are lower than the national comparisons. The median household income is $72,155.[5]

China Grove is a small town that sits next to Landis. The town applied to the North Carolina Legislature for a charter granted on March 11, 1889. It is assumed there was a settlement in China Grove as early as 1710. The town was first known as Savits Mill. Then, in 1846, the name was changed to Lutherville, but in 1849, it was given the name as we know it now, China Grove. China Grove has a population of 4,456 residents. The median income is $41,707.[6] Sandy Ridge Church sits at the point where Landis and China Grove meet. Sandy Ridge is a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Denomination.

The African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church is a historically African American Protestant denomination founded in New York City, New York. Also known as the Freedom Church, the AMEZ was officially recognized in 1821, but the foundations for Zion's founding began in the late 1700s.[7]

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[5] Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church, *Our Church History: A Historical Sketch of Sandy Ridge African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (Toronto, Canada: Lifetouch, 2013).

[6] Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church, *Our Church History*

In 1796, due to frequent acts of discrimination and segregation in white Methodist churches, many Black parishioners left to form separate ministries. This departure led to the creation of the AME Zion denomination, which started as an informal meeting of multiple, Black-founded churches from various cities. The first church, collectively run by the AMEZ and named Zion, was built in New York in 1800.

In 1820, after failing to maintain amiable connections to the predominantly white John Methodist Church, also based in New York, six of the African American churches gathered for their annual conference to determine the future of the AMEZ. Among the church leaders was James Varick, a preacher who had been present since before the church's founding and had encouraged the initial separation in 1796. At the 1820 summit, Varick was ordained as a church elder. In 1821, Varick became the AMEZ's first bishop.[8]

Between 1820 and 1860, the AMEZ grew to nearly 200,000 members spread across most Northern states. These numbers swelled during the Civil War as freedom came to the enslaved people of the ex-Confederate states, which allowed them to establish AMEZ branches across the South. Also, Northern AMEZ ministers and others traveled south following the war to actively help the newly freed people.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the AMEZ church had become a leading African American denomination, second only to the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) churches. AMEZ, however, challenged the standard protocols of white and black denominations at the time. For example, they were among the first denominations to

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[7] William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, NC: AME Zion Publishing House, 1974), 43.

[8] Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church,* 91.

ordain women as ministers. They also promoted women, putting them in authority within the church. By the 1950s and 1960s, AMEZ church members contributed significantly to the Civil Rights Movement.[9] Many joined peaceful protests and marches nationwide while church leaders opened their doors to allow civil rights planning meetings and rallies.

Today, the AMEZ Church's mission continues to promote the spiritual and socioeconomic uplifting of all people of African descent. The AMEZ Church has over 1.4 million church members throughout the United States and missionaries worldwide. It also has churches in western and southern Africa. As of 2012, the AMEZ Church entered a pact with other Methodist churches to transcend racial boundaries and encourage church unity. The church currently runs six institutions of seminary learning, four on the East Coast of the United States and two in West Africa. It also sponsors scholarships for black students worldwide. The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church is divided into twelve episcopal areas. Each episcopal area is broken down into conferences, and each conference is further broken down into districts. Sandy Ridge is the fourth church in the Salisbury District. The Salisbury District is part of the Western North Carolina Conference in the Piedmont Episcopal Area.

Though the exact date is unknown, the best available information indicates that Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church was founded around 1866 in a little brush arbor on the hillside near Sechler's Pond in China Grove Township, Rowan County, North Carolina. It might be proper to say that a few devout souls, perhaps Albert Sherrill, George Reid, and other faithful men and women of their time, conceived the idea of this place of

[9] Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church,* 529.

worship following the Civil War in America and the emancipation of the institution of slavery.

Rev. Bill Pethel is reportedly the first minister to serve this little band of people, seeking to worship God freely and without fear. The brush arbor was only a temporary place of worship. The membership grew, and the church was soon moved to where the present building now stands. The first actual structure was built from hewn logs, with a layer of red clay between each piece of timber. Much sweat, toil, and privation must have accompanied this early beginning of Sandy Ridge Church. But there was “gain for their losses” and “balm for their pains.” Many souls were converted here, and the foundation was laid for Christian homes and worthy endeavors.

While these early fathers and mothers did not have the advantages of education yet, they inspired county authorities to provide a school for their children. This same log cabin was used as a place of daily instruction. About fifteen dollars per month was a good salary for the best teachers. Though it moved to another building, Sandy Ridge School became Aggrey Memorial High School and remained until 1966. The building served as the seventh-grade annex for Corriher-Lipe Junior High School, following the mandate of total integration of schools in Rowan County in 1968. Aggrey Memorial was renovated and expanded to house the present Landis Elementary School. With desegregation, the Rowan County School Board has discarded this historical fact, but this congregation is dedicated to keeping our founding fathers' facts and heritage alive. Many artifacts from the former school are housed in the Aggrey Fellowship Hall.

As time rolled onward and the years grew to full maturity, another church building was erected. This was a small frame structure that served the membership's needs for more than thirty years. Meanwhile, the membership continued to grow, which necessitated the enlargement of this frame building. During these years, a small organ was purchased for the church choir. Though the purchase price was meager, the payments were made from extra free will offerings. When the last payment was made, someone suggested that these free-will offerings be continued to form the nucleus of a "building fund;" this was done, and thus, the foundation for the modern brick structure that now serves as the fellowship building began. The former sanctuary of this building was dedicated as the Aggrey Memorial Educational Building on May 21, 1995, and the Lower Level was designated the R. W. Sherrill Learning Center.[10]

Much inspiration and encouragement for this new church building came from such former pastors as Reverends J. E. Aggrey, J. C. Nelson, and R. E. Clement. Even in 1943, the church had a regular following of about 200 members, who could be connected to about twelve or fifteen families. Among the members during the last century were two medical doctors—the late Dr. L. A. Gibson and Dr. G. W. Sherrill.

In the early 1960s, a beautiful parsonage was obtained, enabling pastors to serve the community more adequately and effectively. Our present church building was completed in September of 1984 under the pastoral leadership of the Rev. Dr. Derrick R. Anderson. More than $180,000.00 was raised by this loyal congregation with the help of and for the glory of God. Over half of these funds were raised under the pastoral leadership of the late Dr. Jerry A. Quick during his fourteen-year tenure at Sandy Ridge.

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[10] Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church, *Our Church History*

Dr. Quick later served as the Presiding Elder of the Wadesboro-Monroe District of the West Central North Carolina Annual Conference. The building program's total cost, including the renovation of the previous church building, was $330,000.00. The mortgage was burned on May 15, 1994, under the leadership of Rev. Bobby L. Smith, who served as the pastor from 1992 – 2005.[11]

Sandy Ridge is proud of its devoted members and that we are a family church. The occupations of the membership have always varied: doctors, skilled laborers, mechanics, teachers, farmers, ministers, and the trades. The late Dr. Richard W. Sherrill, one of our Trustees Emeritus, served as a General Officer in the A.M.E. Zion Church for forty years. He served twenty years as the Manager of the Publishing House and twenty-four years as the Financial Secretary of the A.M.E. Zion Church. He was the first layman elected to that office by the General Conference.

Sandy Ridge is also proud of its pastors! The former Presiding Elder of the Salisbury District, Dr. Lee Clinton Siler, is a former pastor and returned to Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church as a member in the 1970s. His widow, Mrs. Myrtice Siler, remained an active member until she passed away in 2007. Rev. Dr. James E. Kwegir Aggrey was a professor at Livingstone College and the co-founder of Achimota College, Ghana. No less than four former pastors were elected General Officers and later Bishops in the A.M.E. Zion Church. They are the Reverends Josiah Caldwell (Financial Secretary), William J. Walls (Editor of the Star of Zion), who later was elected to the level of Bishop in the forty-second line of succession, Elizah L. Madison (Financial Secretary), and Hampton T. Medford (Secretary-Treasurer of the

[11] Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church, *Our Church History*

Department of Overseas Missions and Editor of the Missionary Seer). The late Dr. Percy Smith was the designer of the Official Logo for the A.M.E. Zion Church and was also a former pastor of Sandy Ridge.

Sandy Ridge served as the beginning for the ministries of the late Dr. James MacArthur Sloan, who pastored several churches throughout the Zion Connection and was serving as the Presiding Elder of the North Charlotte District of the Western North Carolina Annual Conference at his passing in 2016, and the late Bishop Louis Hunter, Sr., who was elected the Ninety-Third Bishop in succession at the Forty-Seventh Session of the General Conference of the A.M.E. Zion Church, and retired at the Fiftieth Session of the General Conference in 2016.[12]

Today, Sandy Ridge has a total membership of 214. It continues to be a strong family church. In recent years, it has struggled to deal with the loss of many of its members because of death, some due to COVID-19, and others due to non-COVID circumstances. Between July and October, there have been seven deaths alone. These recent deaths, combined with the deaths of other members over the last year, had a tremendous effect on the membership. How can the church help these members recover? There needs to be a process in which the church can help facilitate the recovery process. Doing so will strengthen the membership and the church to become a "house of recovery" where the wounded and broken come to be made whole.

[12] Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church, *Our Church History*

Ministry Journey

I have been in ministry since June 1998. I have been in pastoral ministry since June 2000. My ministry journey started around 1980 as a ten-year-old in my home church, Mt. Pleasant AME Zion, in Statesville, North Carolina. My pastor, Rev. Herman Anderson, was the first ministerial influence in my life. Rev. Anderson baptized me. It was under his tutelage that I learned about the AME Zion Church. I became active in the church, serving as an acolyte, Jr. Steward, and in the Buds of Promise. Rev. Anderson left Mt. Pleasant and was elected a bishop in the AME Zion church. The foundation had been laid for what God would later call me to do.

I feel blessed when I think about those who taught me what I know about being a pastor. One of the people who directly influenced the type of pastor I am today is Rev. William Gullick. He is first on my list. Rev. Gullick was my father in the ministry. He taught me the meaning of humility. Rev. Gullick never considered himself the most gifted preacher. He never thought himself to be the best pastor. He never sought accolades. Rev. William Gullick was just a man willing to be used by God. That is what made him great. The congregation loved him. Under his leadership, Mt. Pleasant grew. I remember when I accepted my call to ministry, I called Rev. Gullick. I was still in Chapel Hill. I told him that I had accepted the call to ministry. He told me to come home and see him. During one of the first conversations we had, he said to me that he would make sure that I got everything I needed to grow. Rev. Gullick was willing to connect me with others that he felt would be able to teach me things that he could not. I remember my father in the ministry telling me that one of the advantages I had that he did not have was

that I had already attended college. This meant that, in his opinion, I could relate to a more educated congregation.

Under Rev. Gullick's leadership, I served on the Usher Board, Steward Board, and Board of Evangelism. Serving in these capacities helped me understand the roles of these boards in the church. My father, in the ministry, allowed me to begin participating in the worship service by reading the scripture, saying the morning prayer, and leading in the Responsive Reading. He also allowed me to preach. This was excellent training. He constantly told me that the only way to become a good preacher was to preach. After I preached, he would give me helpful feedback. He became more than my father in the ministry; he became my spiritual father. I loved him deeply. He left Mt. Pleasant to pastor two other churches, White Rock AME Zion Church and Bethesda AME Zion Church. Wherever he pastored, he invited me to preach at least one night of the church's revival. He did everything that he could to prepare me for the moment that I became a pastor. When he passed away, it took a lot out of me. When Rev. Gullick left Mt. Pleasant, I was in turmoil. I did not know who my next pastor would be and if we would gel, but God worked it out.

Rev. Carlton Williams followed Rev. Gullick. Rev. Williams is an anointed preacher. I was only under his leadership for a year and a half. However, during the time I was with him, Rev. Williams taught me a lot about the art of preaching. I traveled with him to various preaching engagements to watch him preach. It was Rev. Williams that taught me the value of studying other preachers. Still today, there are certain preachers that I study, watching for word choice and transitions of how they close. Other preachers influenced my ministry. Men such as Presiding Elder Dr. Wilford Bailey,

Presiding Elder Glenn Grayson, and Rev. Jerrold Tiggett all had a hand in influencing my ministerial journey. Even more significant than the people who influenced me, some events occurred in my life that significantly influenced my ministerial journey.

It was a reasonably warm fall night in September 2017. I was driving home from visiting my daughter, who was six years old at the time. My aunt called, and she was hysterical. She told me that my mother was just in a car accident. They were in an ambulance headed to the hospital. My mother and her sister had taken a tour of the Midwest. They were in Billings, Montana. It was rainy and wet. My mother was crossing the street when an SUV struck her. She flipped over the SUV and landed on her back. They took her to the hospital, where she underwent emergency surgery.

I immediately began to pray that God would be with my mother. I called my brother and told him what happened. When I arrived home, I told my father of the accident. My brother began to make arrangements to get my father to Montana. He was able to use some of the connections he had to get my father a flight to Atlanta. My brother joined my father in Atlanta, and together, they flew to Billings, Montana. Two days later, my best friend and I joined them. On the flight, I mentally tried to prepare myself for seeing my mother. I had many conversations with God. My brother already informed me of how bad it was. However, nothing could prepare me for seeing my mother. The moment I went into the room, I immediately broke down.

The woman who raised me was lying in that bed, and I could not recognize her. She had tubes in her nose and mouth. Her back was in a brace, and she had rods protruding from her leg and hip. My dad wanted me to be the spokesman, so I met with the surgeon to discuss the extent of her injuries. The surgeon explained that my mother

suffered a broken back, pelvis, leg, and a severely damaged ankle. They had to put rods in her back and leg. He went on to tell me that she had already gone through two surgeries. During the second surgery, she suffered a stroke. They could not tell me the stroke's damage until they took her out of sedation. The tubes connected to a machine that was breathing for her because one of her lungs had collapsed. I still hear the surgeon telling me that God was looking out for my mother. He said that ninety-eight percent of the patients suffering the extent of the injuries she suffered die instantly or do not survive the night. I thank God for his faithfulness every day.

My mother had a long, hard road to recovery. She had to have several more surgeries. Followed by eight months in a rehabilitation facility. It was not easy. There were days when my mother felt like giving up. She would tell me that she was tired and that it felt like giving up was easier. I remember a conversation that we had one evening. I had been there visiting with her, and out of nowhere, she asked, “Patrick, why did God let this happen to me? Where was God when I got hit?” I could not answer right away. As I began to ponder those questions, I began to cry. Even now, I get misty when I think about it. I prayed that God would give me an answer. I looked at my mother with tears in my eyes, and I told her that I did not know why God allowed the accident to happen. However, I know without a doubt where God was.

I told my mother, “God was right there with you when you were flipping over in that SUV, God was there to cushion your fall. When you had your stroke on the operating table, God was there to make sure that it would not take away your ability to talk. In other words, he was there all the time.” Later, while in the rehabilitation facility, it was discovered that my mother had esophageal cancer. She once again had a battle to

fight. She had to go through chemotherapy and radiation at the same time. I have never seen my mother so sick. Shortly after that, she was told that because of the extensive damage to her left ankle and foot, she would never be able to walk again. Thanksgiving and Christmas were spent in the rehabilitation facility. It was a difficult time for my family. However, God was there all the time. I soon had to lean on this knowledge.

December 11, 2018, is a date that I will never forget. My mother had been home for about four months and was improving. My father took her to her various appointments. It had snowed a few days before, and while it had started melting, there was still snow on the ground. I decided that morning to spend some time with my daughter. When I left that morning, my father was sitting on the couch. On the way out the door, I said something sarcastic to him. We both laughed. Several hours later, I got a phone call from my mother. She did not know where my father was. She explained that he had gone down to get the mail from the mailbox forty-five minutes ago and had yet to return. I immediately knew that something was wrong. I called my godbrother to go by the house to check on my father. I left my daughter and came racing home. When I got to my exit, I heard sirens. I prayed that they were not headed to my house. In my heart, I knew they were. I was afraid of what that meant. When I pulled up, the EMS was there along with the fire department.

I heard my mother screaming. As I walked up the driveway, I saw my father lying on the carport. I ran to get to him, but my godbrother's wife held me. All I can remember is yelling, “That's my daddy. That's my daddy. Get up, Daddy, please!” The EMS worked feverishly to revive him; after an hour had passed, the EMS informed me that my father had gone too long without oxygen. If they managed to revive him, my father would never

be the same again. I was faced with the hardest decision of my life. I had to decide to let my father go. There has never been a more difficult decision to make. This man was my hero. He was the reason that I started coaching football. He was the reason that I had gotten into administration. I was matriculating toward my doctorate in Educational Leadership to be a principal as he had been. Now, I had to let him go. My initial instinct was to say keep trying, but I knew that would be selfish. So, I told them to let him go.

The days following my dad's sudden passing were hard. To date, that has been the most difficult sermon I have ever had to preach, my father's eulogy. I ran through a plethora of emotions, anger being the chief. I was angry with God. In my mind, God had already taken my spiritual father, Rev. Gullick, and now God had taken my biological father, Marlin Carter Tate, Jr. I could not understand why God took my father so suddenly. I never had closure. So, for a long time, I was angry with God. I was angry that, in my mind, He took my father away from me. I was angry that I never got the chance to tell my father that I loved him before he died. I was angry that he left me alone. I was just angry! I was pastoring my third church, Southern City Tabernacle AME Zion Church. I would preach on Sunday mornings, still mad at God. I was trying to pastor my membership, and I would be angry, which hampered my decision-making ability. My dad's death affected me in other ways as well.

There were days when I did not know whether I was coming or going. I remember feeling overwhelmed. I could no longer write or even concentrate on writing, so I withdrew from the doctoral program. It was four years before I could focus on school again. But instead of returning to complete my doctorate, I decided to finish my Master of Divinity degree and pursue a Doctor of Ministry degree.

Synergy

In June of 2023, Bishop Daryll B. Starnes gave me my twenty-third pastoral appointment. I had just completed my eleventh year as pastor of the historic Southern City Tabernacle AME Zion Church in East Spencer, North Carolina. I had been blessed to come to Southern City wounded and broken, and I was able to find healing. While serving as the pastor, I endured tests and trials in my personal life. My faith has taught me that tests and trials are frequently preparation for something greater. I was not sure what God was preparing me for, but I knew something was coming.

In May of 2023, it became public that the pastor of the Sandy Ridge Church in Landis was retiring. I suddenly found my name attached to Sandy Ridge as possibly its next pastor. It was confirmed when Bishop Starnes appointed me as the new pastor of Sandy Ridge AME Zion Church that Saturday in June. In my six months as pastor, I have gained an appreciation for the church membership. I genuinely feel that I have been called to pastor this church in this season.

When the context of Sandy Ridge is analyzed, several things stand out. History shows that it was at one time in a much better place than it currently stands. This can be attributed to a couple of factors: first, loyal and dedicated membership, and second, effective leadership.

Sandy Ridge has a history of having a membership that is loyal and dedicated. This was exemplified in the church's efforts to expand. Because of the church's growth, there was a need for expansion. Instead of expanding the current structure, the church decided to build a new facility. The members wanted to stay in their current location, so they bought the land next to it. This became the site for the new church. The new church

is the present church. The old church became the fellowship hall. Later, the house next door was purchased and became the parsonage. The members sacrificed and paid the church and parsonage's mortgage several years early. The current members who were there often spoke of the members' pride in their church. If you lived in the Landis, China Grove, or Kannapolis area, Sandy Ridge was the place to worship. There were church ministries that focused on strengthening members. Today, members quickly state that loyalty and dedication to the church have waned significantly. Part of the loss of church loyalty and commitment can be connected to the lack of ministries that strengthen members and give them a sense of church pride. Another critical aspect is the presence of effective leadership.

Sandy Ridge has been blessed with a legacy of effective leadership. Men such as Rev. Jerry Quick and Dr. Lee Siler served as pastors at Sandy Ridge. Both men went on to become Presiding Elders. Dr. James Aggrey was a professor at Livingstone College for many years. He was later a co-founder of a college in Ghana. Rev. Dr. Percy Smith designed the present logo of AME Zion Church. William J. Walls and Louis Hunter, Sr., left Sandy Ridge and eventually became church bishop. All these men have served as pastors of the Sandy Ridge. It is their proverbial shoulders on which I stand as the current pastor of this illustrious church. Now that my name has been added to the list, it has become my duty to add to this rich legacy. The only way that this will be possible is to exemplify effective leadership. I think that my unique experience in dealing with trauma and grief in my personal life has equipped me to pastor Sandy Ridge in this particular season. The current education, coupled with the training I am receiving in this program,

will enhance the skill set I have to meet the needs of my context. I desire that my research, developed methods, and practices aid me in this endeavor.

The focused aim of the project is to provide a process for grief ministry. Through the strategic use of topical, expositional, and other thematic series of the preached word, healing can be fostered. Other appropriate research-based methods and leadership models emphasizing healing specifically focused on grief will also be used in a more intimate setting, such as small groups and Power Hour (Bible Study). My central theme will be healing, and my focus will be grief.

One of the ways to strengthen the current membership in my context is to focus on healing from grief. Through facilitating this process, I will build membership trust in my ability to lead effectively and strengthen the members. A stronger member will become a loyal and dedicated member, showing compassion for others and being prepared for ministry.

Conclusion

Once I received the official appointment to become the new pastor of Sandy Ridge, the nervousness accompanied it. Sandy Ridge is a historic church. It has a rich history of men who pastored there and went on to higher roles in the church. It is one of the leading churches in the Salisbury District. In some eyes, it is the leading church in the Salisbury District. Not even a month after receiving the appointment, we were voted to host the One Hundred Thirty-Third Session of the Salisbury District Conference. With these things in my mind, I asked myself, “Where do you start?” The answer that came to

me was to start with a book study, but not just any book, a specific book, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Thom S. Rainer.

One evening in the book study, we began to discuss emotional and spiritual healing. I shared my story of the death of my father and my healing journey. Then, a member shared her current struggle with grief at the passing of her husband. Another talked about her struggle with grief when her mom passed. Then, another talked about his grief struggle when his wife passed. Before I knew it, half of those in attendance had shared their stories. By the time it was over, there was not a dry eye in the house, including my own. It was at that moment that the seed was planted.

Sandy Ridge is a great congregation. However, it has lost some of what it once was due to a decrease in church dedication and loyalty. That night at the book study showed me that many members are not whole because they are not healed. They are still wrestling with grief. There is nothing in place at the church to help facilitate healing, so many remain stuck there. Through my project, a process for grief ministry can be born, thus enabling members to strengthen. I will utilize the preached word in my project through strategic sermon series, Power Hour sessions, and small group sessions. I will use surveys and questionnaires to initiate my project and create a baseline.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

In my opinion, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the most important books in the world. These four Gospels are our primary sources for the life and teachings of Jesus. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels of these books. Synoptic comes from two Greek words, meaning "to see together" and "able to be seen together."[1] These three Gospels give the same account of the events in the life of Jesus. There are some omissions and additions within the Gospels, but most of the material is the same, and the arrangement is the same. Of the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew is considered the most popular.

Chapters Five through Seven in the Gospel of Matthew have been called the Sermon on the Mount. It has been called one of the most significant and comprehensive teachings in the New Testament. The Sermon on the Mount profoundly reorients ethical and spiritual values. In the sermon, Jesus uncovers His followers' expected attitudes and behaviors. The sermon begins with a group of verses called The Beatitudes. The text used for this study is a part of the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:4. In this chapter, an analysis of this text will be conducted. It is the contention of this chapter that Jesus wanted his followers to understand that even in unexpected situations, one can still be blessed. Jesus defies

[1] Bob E. Patterson, *Discovering Matthew* (New York, NY: Guideposts, 2010), 10.

conventional thought by pronouncing a blessing on those who may seem unfortunate by the world's standards. Those who mourn are not hopeless. Instead, they are promised comfort.

Authorship

There is not much known about Matthew.[2] It is known that he was one of Jesus Christ's twelve disciples. Matthew was also known as Levi, a Capernaum tax collector, before his calling to follow Jesus. Tax collectors were often viewed in a negative light by fellow Jews. They were agents of the Roman Empire and collected taxes to return to the government. Tax collectors were associated with greed and corruption. Matthew's profession made many other Jews and Christians distrust him because of the persecution the Roman Empire had inflicted on other religious groups.[3] The Jews hated members of their race who entered the civil service of their conquerors. In the eyes of his people, he was nothing better than a quisling.

One gift would have set him apart from the other disciples. Most of the other disciples were fishermen and were not skilled at putting words together. However, Matthew would be an expert in this area. Matthew was also an accurate record keeper and keen observer. Despite his seedy reputation, Jesus called Matthew to be one of His disciples. The calling of Matthew demonstrated Jesus' willingness to include the marginalized and despised by society.

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[2] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew*, 10.

[3] W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew: A New Translation* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1971), 16.

Matthew's call to follow Jesus is recorded in the Gospel of Matthew (9:9). The Gospels of Mark and Luke also recount his calling (Mk. 2:14) and (Lk. 5:27-28). The Gospels speak of Matthew sitting in the tax collector's booth when Jesus comes to him and says, "Follow me." Matthew immediately gets up and follows Jesus, signifying a complete transformation from tax collector to disciple of Christ. Further, it illustrates a fundamental foundational message: redemption and new beginnings are available to all, regardless of their past actions or societal status.[4] Jesus calling of Matthew is an important moment in His ministry. It demonstrates His inclusivity in ministry.

Matthew, the disciple of Jesus, has been accredited with authorship of the first Gospel. However, most modern scholars question whether the Gospel came entirely from Matthew's hand.[5] This question centers around Matthew's use of the Markan Gospel as a source. Matthew's narrative framework came from Mark. Scholars assert that approximately 90% of Mark can also be found in Matthew.[6] It has been affirmed that 97% of Mark's words also appear in Matthew.[7] In his commentary on the *Gospel of Matthew*, David Turner states that any view of authorship depends upon inferences drawn from internal evidence (the book itself) and upon assessment of the credibility of the patristic testimony that Matthew the apostle wrote the Gospel (external evidence).[8]

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[4] Albright and Mann, *Matthew: A New Translation,* 16.

[5] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew*, 10.

[6] David E. Turner, *Matthew: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 13.

[7] Turner, *Matthew, 13.*

[8] Turner, *Matthew, 13.*

The internal evidence, including Matthew's grammar, syntax, literary style, and distinctive themes, leads most scholars to conclude that he was a Jew who understood Hebrew and Judaism.[9] This argument allows scholars to embrace the traditional view that Matthew wrote the Gospel, but it does not prove it. Externally, the attribution of this Gospel to Matthew, the apostle, goes back to our earliest surviving patristic testimonies, and there is no evidence that any other author was ever proposed.[10] As far back as we can trace it, and from the earliest manuscript attributions that have survived, it is always the Gospel kata Matthaionthis.[11] Moreover, this Gospel was ascribed to Matthew, the apostle, by the first quarter of the second century. The titles of notable ancient manuscripts scribe the Book of Matthew. Patristic tradition agrees with this ascription.[12] Christian scholars such as Clement of Alexandria (early third-century C.E.) and Origen (mid-third century C.E.) agree.[13] Some scholars held to the thought that one who had been an eyewitness to the life of Christ would not have needed to use Mark as a sourcebook for the life of Jesus in the way Matthew does. In his response to this line of thought, the Christian historian Papias provided some vital information.

Papias indicated that Matthew collected the sayings of Jesus in the

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[9] Turner, *Matthew, 12.*

[10] Turner, *Matthew, 12.*

[11] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 84.

[12] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew*, 12.

[13] France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* 106.

Hebrew tongue.[14] Therefore, it is believed that Matthew wrote the book "which all must draw if they wish to know what Jesus taught."[15]

Date and Audience

The current majority view that Matthew's Gospel was written in the fourth quarter of the first century depends mainly on three arguments: (a) that its setting reflects the period of final separation between the church and the synagogue, probably around A.D. 85, (b) that it is written in the light of the experience of the Roman capture of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, and (c) that it is dependent on the Gospel of Mark, which some scholars also date after A.D. 70, others shortly before.[16] The Book of Matthew was written sometime after the Romans had already destroyed Jerusalem (after A.D. 70) and before A.D. 96. The best date is around A.D. 85.[17]

The geographical location where the Gospel was written remains a matter of debate. Some scholars are happy to accept the consensus that it was somewhere in Syria or Palestine (the latter being generally assumed in patristic accounts). However, others are less convinced by the confident assertion of some that the specific location was Antioch.[18]

The Jewish nation was destroyed in A.D. 70 because it had revolted against Rome. Judaism survived because of the Pharisees. Some scholars argue that in the town

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[14] Albright and Mann, *Matthew*, 25.

[15] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew*, 12.

[16] France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* 109.

[17] France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* 109.

[18] France, *The Gospel of Matthew,* 109.

of Jamnia near the Mediterranean coast, rabbinic Jews pulled themselves together by excommunicating Christians and strictly interpreting the Old Testament. After A.D. 70, Judaism and Christianity had to strike a new course. What initially had been an all-Jewish church was now becoming increasingly Gentile. The church for which Matthew wrote was threatened on the side of its Jewish origins by Pharisaic legalism.[19] It was also being threatened on its Gentile side by the thought that the law was no longer binding.[20] Frank Stagg's introduction to the Gospel of Matthew states, "Matthew points to a way which escapes, on the one hand, the pride, superficiality, and irrelevance of legalism and ethical irresponsibility of the license of what is called liberty."[21] Ultimately, Matthew wanted to convince or reassure his readers that Jesus is the Christ of Old Testament expectation and the creator of an indestructible church.

Outline and Discourses

There are five distinctive teaching sections in the Gospel of Matthew. A narrative section precedes and introduces each teaching section. This formula prepares the reader for a significant block of new material that concludes each section. Matthew follows the framework of Mark for the account of Jesus' ministry. The outline of Matthew can be seen as follows:

> Prologue: Jesus' birth and significance (Mt. 1–2)
> Jesus' teaching and ministry (Mt. 3–25)
> Book 1 (Mt. 3–7)
> Jesus gains followers (Mt. 3–4)

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[19] William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1975), 23.

[20] Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 25.

[21] Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 25.

Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7)
Book 2 (Mt. 8–10)
Jesus works miracles (Mt. 8–9)
Jesus sends his disciples (Mt. 10)
Book 3 (Mt. 11–13:52)
Jesus is confronted and withdraws (Mt. 11–12)
Parables about the kingdom (Mt. 13:1–52)
Book 4 (Mt. 13:53–18:35)
Jesus is revealed as the Son of God (Mt. 13:53–17:27)
How "greatness" works in the Kingdom (Mt. 18)
Book 5 (Mt. 19–25)
People struggle with Jesus' kingship (Mt. 19–23)
Teachings of judgment in the kingdom to come (Mt. 24–25)
Climax: Jesus' sacrifice, victory, and commission to his disciples (Mt. 26–27)[22]

Another characteristic of the Gospel of Matthew is the explicit fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecy by the advent of the coming Messiah. "All this was done that it might be fulfilled, which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet saying" is a consistently repeated theme.[23] To Matthew, Jesus came to fulfill the Old Testament.

As previously stated, Matthew's main idea is that Jesus is Christ, the Son of God. He did not come to destroy the Law of Moses but to fulfill the law and to teach a more excellent way of life as members of a new community, the Christian Church. Matthew's most striking characteristic is its systematic grouping of Jesus' sayings. Most of the sayings recorded by Matthew are found in sections referred to as "discourses." The main body of Matthew is composed of five discourses of Jesus's teaching. Each discourse is preceded by narratives that are skillfully adjusted to introduce them.[24] These discourses are "The Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:29), The Mission Charge of the Twelve (9:35-

[22] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew*, 11.

[23] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew,* 11.

[24] Paul J. McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew* (New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield, 2013), 33.

11:1), Parables on the Mystery of the Kingdom (13:1-52), Life in the Christian Community (18:1-35), and The Drama of the End of the Age (24:1-26:1)."[25]

Each discourse is presented as what Jesus said at a particular time in his ministry, and in each case, the surrounding narrative portrays a situation in which that aspect of teaching is relevant. Those who think of the Gospels as chronicles of the events and sayings of Jesus in the order in which they occurred, therefore, prefer to regard these "discourses" as actual sermons given at one time and place by Jesus in substantially the form in which Matthew has recorded them.

Sermon on the Mount

While the Synoptic substructure on which each of the Gospels is based is found in Mark, in this case, there is very little material in common with Mark, and the basic Synoptic parallel is Luke 6:20-49.[26] The two "sermons" share a great deal of common material (all but eight verses of Luke 6:20-49 are paralleled), though not always closely, (Mt. 5-7) in roughly the same order (the only exceptions are the placing of Luke 6:27-28, 31). Each begins with beatitudes and ends with the parable of the two houses.[27] The opening and closing pericopes are, however, instructive in that while the subject matter is similar, the wording is conspicuously different in each case, to such an extent that, at least in the case of the Beatitudes, it is easier to explain the Matthean and Lucan sets as deriving from two separate traditions.[28] So, while some of the common

[25] McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew,* 33.

[26] McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew,* 37.

[27] McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew,* 38.

material is verbally very similar, at other times, Matthew's "parallel" material appears to derive from a separate tradition, and the overall structure of the "sermon" rather than its specific content links Matthew with Luke.[29]

Historical

In Chapters Five through Seven, simple and colorful language is used to show how believers should act. This teaching is most known as the Sermon on the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gave His followers a pattern of behavior and a spiritual lifestyle that far surpassed the conventional pattern of Judaism and John the Baptist. Jesus' word confronted the ordinary standards of Judaism by transcending outward behavior; it penetrated inner motives and attitudes. His listeners were challenged to rethink their thoughts about the Kingdom of God. Some Christian scholars have stated that this discourse makes the Gospel of Matthew distinctive.

The Sermon on the Mount does not appear as such in Mark and appears only partially in Luke 6:17-49. Scholars have proposed several theories to explain this variation among the Synoptic Gospels. Some scholars believe that Matthew created the sermon from traditions, documentary sources, and his ingenuity, so the sermon should be attributed to something other than the historical Jesus.[30] This creates a problem. This approach leads to the thought that the Gospels are unhistorical fabrications concocted for strictly theological reasons.[31]

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[28] McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew,* 38.
[29] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew,* 26.

[30] Turner, *Matthew,* 141.

[31] Turner, *Matthew,* 141.

A second view holds that Matthew created the sermon's structure, but genuine Jesus traditions make up its content.[32] In this view, Matthew collated various teachings of the historical Jesus that were uttered initially at different times in different locations and placed them in his narrative.[33] Many evangelicals hold this view. However, according to David Turner, Matthew brackets the sermon with indicators of a specific time and place when the sermon occurred (5:1-2, 7:28-8:1), so these historical markers must be ignored or viewed as fictional to be adopted.[34]

The third view is that Matthew accurately records the gist (the ipsissima vox, "the very voice" of Jesus) of a historical sermon that Jesus uttered.[35] Some scholars further affirm that Matthew gives an exact and complete word-for-word (ipsissima verba, "the very words" of Jesus) transcription of the sermon Jesus uttered.[36] Although conservative evangelicals hold both the second and third views, the third view is highly favorable because of the Gospels' genre and the historical transmission of Jesus' teachings.[37] Authentic reporting of a historical nature can be something other than word-for-word transcription. It is not easy to conceive how much transcription could be compiled. The sermon is instead a reliable summary of what Jesus said, an account that bears the mark of an editor.[38] Certain of Matthew's sayings appear in other contexts in Mark and

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[32] Turner, *Matthew,* 141.

[33] Turner, *Matthew,* 141.

[34] Turner, *Matthew,* 141.

[35] Turner, *Matthew,* 141.

[36] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew,* 31.

[37] Turner, *Matthew,* 140.

[38] Patterson, *Discovering Matthew,* 39.

Luke, evidently because Jesus repeated key themes in his itinerant ministry.[39] Some scholars believe that the sermon incorporates teachings from the occasion represented in 5:1-2 and from other, later discourses of Jesus.[40]

Sermon Structure

The Sermon on the Mount should be known as Jesus' representative ethical teachings. The summary statement of 4:23 presents a word/deed complex.[41] Accordingly, 4:23 and the similar summary in 9:35 provide a frame of bookends for Jesus's ministry of teaching and doing miracles. Both the words (Mt. 5-7) and the works (Mt. 8-9) demonstrate the authority of the kingdom of heaven.

There are many approaches to the structure of this sermon. "Interpreters" have proposed various structures for the sermon. Daniel Patte, a Christian scholar, suggests a chiasmus, but the asymmetry of its proportions likely obscured this proposed structure to its first readers."[42] An inclusio framing the sermon with blessings and warnings is more persuasive, although had this been Matthew's purpose, one wonders why he does not conclude with some of the "woes" used in Matthew 23.8.[43] W. Davies used a random statement of Simeon the Just to divide the sermon into sections on law (5:17-48),

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[39] Clifton J. Allen, *The Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1969), 162.

[40] Turner, *Matthew,* 142.

[41] Turner, *Matthew,* 142.

[42] Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 157.

[43] Keener, *A Commentary of Matthew*, 157.

worship (6:1-18), and deeds of loving-kindness.[44] Joachim Jeremias more convincingly divides the sermon based on its audience implied in the thesis statement, 5:20: theologians (5:17-48), pious laypersons (6:1-18), and disciples (6:19-7:27).[45] The following analysis is based on the inclusion form by the references in Matthew 5:17 and 7:12:

Analysis of the Sermon on the Mount

- *Introductory narrative framework* (5:1-2): Jesus is prompted to teach by the crowds, and the disciples gather around him to hear his teachings.
- *Introduction to the sermon (5:3-16):* The Beatitudes (5:3-12) describe how followers of God should live their lives. Those who live by Jesus's teachings manifest the values of the rule of God to the world.
- *Body* (5:17- 7:12): Jesus announces and explains his relationship to the law with six contrasts.
- *Conclusion to the sermon* (7:13-27) Jesus challenges his listeners with three stark contrasts.[46]

The Beatitudes

A beatitude, or macarism, consists of a pronouncement concerning who was blessed, often followed by a promise as to why they are blessed. To be blessed is to be the happy recipient of divine favor or approval. The Beatitudes reveal key character traits that God approves in his people. The Beatitudes were spoken—and later recorded—in a particular language, time, and place, religious, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts.[47]

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[44] Keener, *A Commentary of Matthew*, 157.

[45] Keener, *A Commentary of Matthew*, 157.

[46] Turner, *Matthew,* 143.

[47] Turner, *Matthew,* 146.

The word “beatitude” is related to the Latin word bestus, meaning “blessed.”[48] To be blessed is to receive God's approval, favor, and endorsement. To be blessed is to be much more than “happy” since the word “happiness” conveys only a subjective, shallow notion of serendipity, not the conviction of being the recipient of God's grace.

Matthew versus Luke

The Beatitudes can be found in both Gospels, Matthew and Luke. The two “evangelists” who recorded the Beatitudes did so with their distinctive styles. Matthew's order is followed to line up their two versions in the chart below, and Luke’s version has been reordered. Matthew and Luke, the two “evangelists” who recorded the Beatitudes, did so in distinctive styles. I followed Matthew's order and reordered Luke's to align their two versions in the chart below.

Table 1 Matthew versus Luke

“MATTHEW 5:1–12”.	“LUKE 6:20–26 [REORDERED]”.
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”.	“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God (v. 20). “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation (v. 24).”
“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”	“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh (v. 21b). Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep (v. 25b).”
“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”	

[48] Turner, *Matthew,* 149.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."	"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled (v. 21a)." "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry (v. 25a)."

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."	
"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."	
"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."	
"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."	
"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."	"Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets (vv. 22–23" "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets (v. 26)."[49]

Some differences are immediately apparent. Matthew has more blessings. Luke has fewer. Luke has matching woes. Matthew does not. Even the beatitudes that appear in both versions have minor variations. When looking at the two texts side by side, it becomes evident that there are differences. However, the more critical question is whether they are fundamentally the same. In other words, are they both projecting the same essential message? Premodern interpreters uniformly assume that the two versions

[49] Rebekah Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing, 2021), 17.

of the Beatitudes preserved in Matthew and Luke contain essentially the same teaching, whereas, from the Enlightenment onward, modern scholars often assume the opposite.[50]

Augustine, in his Harmony of the Gospels, explored three possibilities for why Matthew and Luke recorded different versions of the Sermon on the Mount: (1) The Sermon was preached once, but the disciples remembered or reported it with some minor differences; (2) Jesus gave the Matthean version first on the Mount and then descended to the "level place" (Lk. 6:17) and gave the Lukan version; or (3) Jesus went up on the mountain and, after choosing the twelve disciples, he descended to a level spot on the slope of the mountain where the multitudes could sit and there delivered the one sermon recorded with slight variations by both evangelists.[51] Option number three proved popular, but Augustine showed little interest in choosing one solution over the other. What mattered to him was the harmony of the two teachings. The two sermons (and thus the two versions of the Beatitudes) offered a unified and harmonious witness.

Audience

When Jesus speaks the Beatitudes, two groups are present: the crowds and his disciples (Mt. 5:1 and Lk. 6:19–20). Does Jesus address his blessings to one group or both? For whom are the Beatitudes written? Almost all interpreters until the Enlightenment era took this approach. While crowds are present for the Sermon, Jesus directly looks at and addresses his disciples (Mt. 5:1–2, Lk. 6:20). Interpreters who take

[50] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, 27.

[51] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, 27.

this approach tend to view the crowds as potential disciples. Jesus speaks the Beatitudes to those who already follow him and (as an invitation) to those who do not yet.

For Baptist Billy Graham (1918–2018), the Beatitudes are "a formula for personal happiness that applies to anyone, no matter what his race, geography, age or circumstance."[52] Graham, like Augustine, believed that God calls all people to the kingdom to lead lives of abundance—lives represented by the Beatitudes.[53] Augustine (and Graham) represent the majority view throughout history when he described the Sermon on the Mount as "the perfect pattern of the Christian life."[54]

In Gospel Context

The pericope for this study is Matthew 5:4. The passage is the second of nine Beatitudes. In this particular Beatitude, Matthew blesses the mourners (pentheō) and promises comfort (parakaleō) in his version.[55] Luke blesses those who weep (klaiō) with a promise of future laughter and a corresponding warning to those who now laugh.[56] The question that comes to mind is, are the weepers who laugh and the mourners who are comforted the same? Most interpreters consider the two versions to be essentially the same.

Until the Reformation, Christian interpreters in the East and the West considered mourning as sorrow for sin. In Clement of Alexandria's Stromata, composed ca. 192–

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[52] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, 32.

[53] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, 32.

[54] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages*, 32.

[55] McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew*, 15.

[56] McCarren, *A Simple Guide to Matthew*, 16.

202, Clement described the mourners of the beatitude as “they who have repented of their former evil life.”[57] The predominant view was that mourners' sorrow was for one's sin and the sin of others. This view presents that it is too narrow. It only considers one aspect of mourning at the expense of other possibilities. One such possibility is the mourning that accompanies loss, especially the loss of a loved one.

It is common today to see the mourning of the beatitude as grief, loss, and death. Luke's Gospel lends support to this interpretation. He included two scenes that we might think of as narrative enactments of the principle that those who weep now will laugh, both of which involve weeping over death. In the first, Jesus sees a widow whose only son has just died. He tells her, “Do not weep,” and then raises her son back to life (Lk. 7:11–17).[58] In the second, the twelve-year-old daughter of a synagogue leader named Jairus dies. Once “again, Jesus tells the mourners, “Do not weep,” and raises the girl back to life (Lk. 8:40–56).[59]

Patristic and medieval interpreters frequently argued that grief over death is not included in the beatitude because it is simply a natural human reaction to loss. For them, Jesus only blesses the countercultural, not the natural. A few, however, pressed gently against this principle, including two premodern thinkers who went against the grain of their eras. They were from Milan and Siena, respectively, and they both lost people they loved.

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[57] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

[58] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

[59] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

In the late fourth century, Ambrose of Milan reoriented grief and death around the hope of the resurrection, not as a cause for triumph but as a matter of longing.[60] Ambrose linked the four Lukan Beatitudes to the four cardinal virtues. He connected weeping to the virtue of prudence since "prudence weeps for this transitory world, and sighs for what is eternal" (Comm. Lk. 5.68).[61] In other words, weeping is not merely sorrow over sin but is a form of longing for the eternal, including the future resurrection of the dead. The same theme appears in Ambrose's second funeral oration for his brother Satyrus, when he defended his own weeping as yearning for the ultimate triumph of God over death. Like Ambrose, Bernardino was aware of and rejected the Stoic condemnation of sorrow: "Sometimes we can and ought to mourn and be afflicted."[62] Modern thinkers typically agree with this rejection of Stoic principles. Bernardino stated, "God that was made flesh remembers that we are but flesh, and does not require of us to be insensible."[63]

They Shall Be Comforted

Comfort might seem too weak a word to bear the weight it is meant to bear here. Still, the slightly less familiar word consolation is better. Jewish scholar C. G. Montefiore defined the biblical notion of consolation as "solace: to make whole or sound, to repair … an injured spirit, a broken faith."[64] The comforted and consoled are "not merely solaced"

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[60] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

[61] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

[62] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

[63] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 109.

[64] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 112.

but "strengthened, fortified, defended, deepened, enlarged, elevated."[65] Comfort, in the biblical sense, is not a pat on the shoulder or a band-aid on a scraped knee but is apocalyptic: it is the remaking of old age into a new age where there are no more tears. Gene Davenport wrote more vividly that comfort is "the strength to endure the ravages of the Darkness without bitterness or despair."[66] Interpreters sometimes appeal to the apostle Paul: "The God of all consolation … consoles us in our affliction, so that we may be able to console those who are in any affliction with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God" (2 Cor 1:4–5).[67] For writers like Sherwood Wirt, this means not only spiritual or emotional support for those who suffer but also providing comfort to mourners through concrete acts of mercy and material assistance to people experiencing poverty and all those who suffer.

Consolations in this life, whether spiritual or material, are only the start of the joy to come. Interpreters, both ancient and modern, find a description of God's promised comfort in the words of a Christian visionary: a man named John who recorded a series of visions he experienced on the island of Patmos. Two texts are quoted repeatedly. They will have the last word.

The first describes a great multitude from every nation standing before the throne of the Lamb, "who have come out of the great ordeal." They are now protected by the Lamb so that "They will hunger no more and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them,

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[65] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 112.

[66] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 112.

[67] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 112.

nor any scorching heat; for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Rv. 7:9, 14–17).[68]

The second text occurs after God's last adversaries, Satan and Death, have been destroyed. The old age has passed away, and the new creation arrives, the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, indicating the merging of God's dwelling place with the earthly realm. And the seer hears a loud voice from the heavenly throne declaring, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Rv. 21:1–4).[69]

Conclusion

The Gospel of Matthew serves as a foundational text in the New Testament, offering deep theological insights and a structured narrative that highlights Jesus' teachings, miracles, and ultimate sacrifice. This chapter explores the authorship, historical context, and theological significance of Matthew's Gospel, particularly in relation to the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. These teachings are central to Christian ethics and emphasize values that challenge conventional human wisdom—urging followers to embrace humility, mercy, righteousness, and a deep trust in God's kingdom.

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[68] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 113.

[69] Eklund, *The Beatitudes Through the Ages,* 113.

Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy reinforces his role as the Messiah and highlights the continuity between Jewish tradition and the new covenant established through Christ. The Gospel is uniquely structured to reflect key discourses, each serving as a framework for understanding the principles of discipleship and Christian living. The Beatitudes, in particular, provide a revolutionary perspective on blessing and divine favor, assuring comfort to those who mourn, promising justice to those who seek righteousness, and elevating the meek, merciful, and peacemakers in God's kingdom.

The historical and cultural context of Matthew's Gospel also underscores its importance in shaping early Christian identity. Written during a period of significant transition, Matthew addresses both Jewish and Gentile audiences, bridging the gap between the Law and the Gospel. His message reassures believers that Jesus is not only the fulfillment of the Old Testament but also the founder of a new spiritual community—one that transcends ethnic and social divisions.

Furthermore, the theological depth of the Sermon on the Mount establishes a new standard of holiness, one that extends beyond external adherence to the Law and calls for an inward transformation of the heart. Jesus' teachings in Matthew challenge religious legalism and emphasize a faith that is deeply personal and relational, marked by love, forgiveness, and a commitment to God's will. The Gospel of Matthew remains a cornerstone of Christian doctrine, offering a profound vision of the kingdom of God and its ethical demands.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

The Transatlantic Slave Trade stands as one of the darkest chapters in human history. It was a horrific period that spanned nearly four centuries. Central to understanding the multifaceted impacts of this period is the exploration of the profound grief and loss experienced by millions of Africans who were forcibly removed from their homeland and subjected to unimaginable hardships. This chapter seeks to delve into the emotional and psychological dimensions of the Middle Passage, a critical component of the slave trade that transformed individuals into commodities and severed the most fundamental human bonds.

Committed to extracting profit from the colonies in the Americas, European powers turned to the African continent. To meet their ever-growing need for labor, they initiated a massive global system that relied on abduction, human trafficking, and racial enslavement at a scale never seen before or since in human history. Never before had millions of people been kidnapped and trafficked over such a great distance.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade was the largest long-distance forced movement of people in recorded history. From the sixteenth to the late nineteenth centuries, over twelve million (with some estimates as high as fifteen million) African men, women, and children were enslaved, transported to the Americas, and bought and sold primarily by

Europeans and Euro-American slaveholders as chattel property used for their labor and skills.[1]

Origins

In the fifteenth century, Portugal became the first European nation to take a significant part in African slave trading. The Portuguese primarily acquired slaves for labor on Atlantic African island plantations, and later for plantations in Brazil and the Caribbean, though they also sent a small number to Europe.[2] Initially, Portuguese explorers attempted to acquire African labor through direct raids along the coast, but they found that these attacks were costly and often ineffective against West and Central African military strategies.[3]

In 1441, Portuguese marauders arrived in Senegal, captured and transported the first African slaves to Europe.[4] This opened up the way for many other countries. In 1492, the Americas were discovered by Christopher Columbus. With this discovery, European powers, including Spain, England, France, and the Netherlands, sought to exploit the New World's vast resources, thus plantation economy began. Crops such as sugar, tobacco, and cotton created a high demand for labor. The native population was enslaved, but many succumbed to the harsh working conditions and disease. Therefore, a

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[1] David Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in America* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5.

[2] Herbert S. Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 27.

[3] Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade, 27.*

[4] John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1800* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 45.

new source of labor was required, enslaved Africans.[5] Subsequently, traders established commercial relations with West and Central African leaders, who agreed to sell slaves taken from various African wars or domestic trading, as well as gold and other commodities, in exchange for European and North African goods.[6]

Over time, the Portuguese developed additional slave trade partnerships with African leaders along the West and Central African coast and claimed a monopoly over these relationships, which initially limited access to the trade for other Western European competitors. Despite Portuguese claims, African leaders enforced their own local laws and customs in negotiating trade relations. Many welcomed additional trade with Europeans from other nations. When Portuguese, and later their European competitors, found that peaceful commercial relations alone did not generate enough enslaved Africans to fill the growing demands of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, they formed military alliances with certain African groups against their enemies.

The Portuguese dominated the early trans-Atlantic slave trade on the African coast in the sixteenth century. As a result, other European nations first gained access to enslaved Africans through privateering during wars with the Portuguese, rather than through direct trade.[7] When English, Dutch, or French privateers captured Portuguese ships during Atlantic maritime conflicts, they often found enslaved Africans on

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[5] Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 67.

[6] Paul Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 91.

[7] Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa,* 91.

these ships, as well as Atlantic trade goods, and they sent these captives to work in their own colonies.[8]

Europe had no contact with Sub-Saharan Africa before the Portuguese, seeking wealth and gold, sailed down the western coast of Africa and reached the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) in 1471.[9] Initially focused on obtaining gold, Portugal established trading relationships and built El Mina Fort to protect its interests in the gold trade.[10]

The convergence of European powers in Sub-Saharan Africa set in motion a devastating process that fused sophisticated labor exploitation, international commerce, mass enslavement, and an elaborate race-based ideology to create the Transatlantic Slave Trade.[11]

Over the following decades, the Spanish, English, French, Dutch, Danish, and Swedish began to make contact with Sub-Saharan Africa as well. Portugal soon converted El Mina into a prison for holding kidnapped Africans, and European traffickers built castles, barracoons, and forts on the African coast to support the forced enslavement of abducted Africans.[12]

By the 1600s, every major European power had established trading relationships with Sub-Saharan Africa and was participating in the transportation of kidnapped Africans to the Americas in some way.[13] During this time period, several thousand

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[8] Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa,* 91.

[9] David B. Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Montgomery, Al.: Equal Justice Initiative, 2022), 9.

[10] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 9.

[11] Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in America,* 113.

[12] Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in America,* 113.

Africans were kidnapped and trafficked to mainland Europe and the Americas, but the volume of human trafficking soon escalated to horrific proportions.

Europeans established plantations that relied on enslaved labor to mass-produce goods (primarily sugar cane) for trading and sale.[14] The cultivation of sugar for mass consumption became a driving force in the growing trafficking of human beings from Africa.

Europeans initially relied on Indigenous people to supply this labor. But mass killings and disease decimated Indigenous populations in what historian David Brion Davis called "the greatest known population loss in human history."[15] The Indigenous population in Mexico plummeted by nearly 90% in 75 years.[16] In Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti and Dominican Republic), the population of Arawak and Taino people fell from between 300,000 and 500,000 in 1492 to fewer than 500 people by 1542, just five decades later.[17] Without Indigenous workers, plantation owners in the Americas grew desperate for a new source of exploited labor.[18]

Driven by the desire for wealth, these European powers shifted from acquiring gold and other goods in Sub-Saharan Africa to trafficking in human beings. Over the following centuries, Europeans demanded that millions of Africans be trafficked to work on plantations and in other businesses in the Americas.

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[13] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 9

[14] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 9.

[15] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 11.

[16] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 11.

[17] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 11.

[18] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 11.

The Middle Passage

The journey known as the Middle Passage, the maritime leg of the triangular trade route from Africa to the Americas, was not merely a geographical relocation—it was a conduit of immense psychological upheaval. As Africans were stripped of their personal identities and plunged into a void of uncertainty, the constructs of their pre-captive lives were obliterated, leaving a deep void where familial and community connections once existed. The grief engendered by these losses was not a transient emotion but a pervasive element of the captive experience, influencing every aspect of slave life and having effects lasting through generations.

The horrific conditions of the Middle Passage meant that of more than 12.5 million Africans kidnapped and trafficked through the Transatlantic Slave Trade, only 10.7 million survived the journey.[19] Almost two million Africans died during the Middle Passage—nearly one million more than all the Americans who have died in every war fought since 1775 combined.[20]

Impact

The Middle Passage, the transatlantic voyage that forcibly brought millions of enslaved Africans to the Americas, remains one of the most harrowing chapters in human history. This journey was not only a central element of the Atlantic Slave Trade but also a profound generator of trauma, whose impacts reverberated across generations. The voyage itself, characterized by brutal conditions and unimaginable suffering, marked

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[19] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 13.

[20] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 13.

the beginning of a systematic dehumanization process that underpinned the institution of slavery in the New World. These things led to a tremendous sense of grief and loss.

The Middle Passage had a devastating impact on the physical health of the captives. The conditions aboard the slave ships were notoriously horrific, with individuals packed tightly into small spaces, leading to outbreaks of disease and high mortality rates.

The psychological and emotional scars left by the Middle Passage were deep and enduring. The trauma of being uprooted, the brutality experienced during the voyage, and the shock of arrival in a strange land where further brutal treatment awaited had profound effects on individual psyche and community dynamics. This portion of this chapter will delve into the psychological aftermath of the Middle Passage, examining how this traumatic experience affected interpersonal relationships and individual mental health among the enslaved populations.

The cultural and social impacts of the Middle Passage resulted in the loss of countless lives, which disrupted social structures and led to a diaspora of African peoples across the Americas.

Physical Impact

Slaves were kept in cramped, unsanitary conditions below decks. Shackled together in small spaces, they had little room to move. Enslaved Africans lay in spaces so tight that they could not fully sit nor stand.[21] These conditions led to the spread

[21] Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 2007), 98.

of diseases like dysentery, smallpox, and scurvy.[22] The lack of hygiene and minimal food and water exacerbated these conditions.

Malnutrition was a common occurrence. Enslaved Africans were often barely fed enough food to survive. Their typical diet consisted of boiled beans, rice, or yams. When provisions ran low, the captain rationed out food, further weakening the enslaved individuals.[23]

African captives were forced to undergo invasive and dehumanizing examinations before they boarded enslavers' ships. Women, men, and children were stripped naked, prodded, and molested to determine if they were "prime slaves" capable of performing hard labor and having children.[24] Traders invasively groped the breasts, buttocks, and vaginal areas of women and young girls, allegedly to assess their childbearing ability. Many of these women suffered systematic sexual violence. Many women bore children as a result of these sexual assaults.[25] Men and boys were similarly molested around the groin, scrotum, and anus.[26] One white trafficker later testified that the process was like what he would do to "a horse in this country, if I was about to purchase him."[27]

At the coast, kidnapped Africans were forced into barracoons, slave pens, and dungeons within prison castles to await the ships that would take them across the Atlantic. Kidnapped Africans were forced to board slave trading ships that

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[22] Klein, *The Atlantic Slave Trade,* 132.

[23] Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in America,* 179.

[24] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 16.

[25] Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History,* 142.

[26] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 16.

[27] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 14.

stayed docked—sometimes for months—until they had loaded enough human cargo to make the passage sufficiently profitable for the enslaver. Records do not establish an exact death toll, but scholars estimate the mortality rate among those confined in barracoons and on-board docked trading ships "equaled that of Europe's fourteenth-century Black Death," which claimed at least 40% of Europe's population.[28] On some ships, the mortality rate was as high as 33%.[29]

The conditions on the slave ships were abhorrent, leading to extremely high mortality rates. It's estimated that between 15% and 20% of the Africans aboard each ship died during the Middle Passage due to disease, malnutrition, mistreatment, and suicide.[30]

Psychological Impact

The Middle Passage profoundly impacted the psychological state of enslaved Africans. The trauma experienced during this journey affected individuals deeply. The effects had long-lasting repercussions. Many of the enslaved Africans developed depression, and post-traumatic stress systems such as flashbacks and nightmares.[31] Many Africans had never seen the ocean before and believed they were being taken to a land of no return, adding to their feelings of hopelessness (Gomez, 1998, 203).[32]

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[28] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 15.

[29] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 17.

[30] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 17.

[31] Samantha Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 185.

[32] Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 203.

One of causes of their stress was the loss of autonomy. Enslaved Africans were forcibly taken from their homes. They were also stripped of their identities. The control that they once had over their lives was suddenly taken away from them completely. Every aspect of their lives was now under the control of their captives. This loss of autonomy was deeply traumatizing. Historian Stephanie Smallwood argues that the Middle Passage created a "social death" forcing them into a completely alien world (Smallwood, 2007, 210).[33] Another stress factor was the violence and brutality that was experienced. Everyday life on the ship was filled with violence and brutality. Enslaved Africans constantly faced the threat of hurt, harm, and danger. Physical abuse, sexual abuse, and public executions were an everyday occurrence. Witnessing and experiencing such violence led to severe psychological distress. This distress led to emerging psychological disorders.

Psychological disorders emerged among the enslaved Africans. Constant fear of death, punishment and the unknown future caused high levels of anxiety. The overwhelming sense of loss of family, community and identity in addition to the bleak prospects of their lives as slaves contributed to a sense of depression. Other issues such as flashbacks and nightmares were more than likely symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The psychological impact of the Middle Passage was severe and long-lasting. The impact not only affected the individuals that survived the journey but also subsequent generations. The trauma endured by enslaved Africans laid a foundation for the collective memory and historical consciousness of African diasporic communities.

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[33] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora,* 210.

Grief and Loss

Loss of Community

Many Africans were forcibly removed from their community settings, which was a profound source of grief. The loss of cultural practices, languages, and traditions that had defined their identities compounded the trauma of dislocation. This cultural disconnection was not just a personal loss but a communal one, as entire cultures were fragmented. Captors often intentionally mixed individuals from different ethic groups and regions to weaken communal bonds and reduce organized resistance.[34]

Some enslaved people were taken from the coast of West Africa and sold to European slave traders. For most captives, the experience of Transatlantic trafficking began weeks, months, or even years before they ever saw the coast. Driven by the increasing external demand from white enslavers and traders, African kidnappers traveled inland and kidnapped people from their villages and towns.[35] In the 18th century, 70% of Africans trafficked in the Transatlantic Slave Trade were free people who had been "snatched from their homes and communities."[36] They were most often forced to walk, bound together in a coffle, for dozens or even hundreds of miles until they reached the coast.[37] Some slaves, such as Ottobah Cugoano, were able to provide some insight into their experiences.

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[34] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora,*158.

[35] Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora,*152.

[36] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*,13.

[37] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*,10.

Ottobah Cugoano was a young child when he was "snatched away from [his] native country, with about eighteen or twenty more boys and girls."[38] The kidnappers brandished "pistols and cutlasses" and threatened to kill the children if they did not come with them.[39] For Ottobah and millions like him, the trauma of familial separation would be inflicted repeatedly in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Ottobah's "hopes of returning home again were all over" as he was marched to the coast and placed in a prison until a white slave trader's ship arrived three days later. "[I]t was a most horrible scene," Ottobah later recounted.[40] "[T]here was nothing to be heard but the rattling of chains, smacking of whips, and the groans and cries of our fellow-men. Some would not stir from the ground, when they were lashed and beat in the most horrible manner."[41]

Loss of Family

Many slaves experienced the acute pain of being torn away from their families. The process often involved violent separations that left no hope of reunion, causing deep emotional scars. The grief of losing loved ones and the support structures of their community was devastating. In many cases, mothers had their children taken away from them.

Some African women faced the inability to protect their small children, who were brought on board with them or born during the voyage. Many African women were

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[38] Olaudah Equiano, and Werner Sollors, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African: An Authoritative Text* (New York, NY: Norton, 1789, Reprint, New York, NY: Norton, 2001), 122.

[39] Equiano and Sollors, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 122.

[40] Equiano and Sollors, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 124.

[41] Equiano and Sollors, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, 124.

forcibly separated from their infants when they were kidnapped from their homes or when they were sold to white traffickers, but some women carried small infants with them. Babies were of little value in the market across the Atlantic, and so abusive sailors used them to manipulate, control, and terrorize their mothers.[42] One account details a sailor who "tore the child from the mother, and threw it into the sea" when the newborn would not stop crying.[43]

Another account from a white slave trafficker details a woman and her nine-month-old who were purchased and placed onboard a ship:

> The baby "would not eat," so the captain "flogged him with a cat o' nine tails" in front of his mother and other captives on the ship. When he noticed that the baby's feet were swollen, the captain ordered his crew to submerge the baby's legs in boiling water, causing "the skin and nails [to come] off." The baby still would not eat, so the captain flogged him at each meal time for several days before finally "[tying] a log of mango, either eighteen or twenty inches long, and about twelve or thirteen pound weight, to the child by a string round its neck," beating the baby again, and dropping the baby to the ground, killing him. His mother—powerless to save her baby—was beaten until she agreed to throw her baby's body overboard.[44]

Loss of Identity

The systematic erasure of their cultural, social, and personal identities was a deliberate tactic to subjugate and control enslaved Africans.

From the moment of capture, enslaved Africans began to lose their sense of self. They were forcibly taken from their communities, separated from family and friends, and thrust into a chaotic and terrifying situation. The trauma of capture was compounded by the dehumanizing conditions aboard the slave ships. Chained together in cramped, filthy

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[42] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade,* 20.

[43] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*,19.

[44] Davis, *The Transatlantic Slave Trade*, 20.

holds, with little regard for their humanity, they were reduced to mere cargo. The physical and psychological abuse they suffered was designed to break their spirits and erase any sense of individuality or community.

The stripping away of cultural identity was furthered by the brutal conditions of the Middle Passage. Enslaved Africans were denied the ability to practice their cultural traditions, speak their native languages, or maintain their social structures.[45] This enforced isolation from their cultural roots was a deliberate strategy to weaken their sense of unity and resistance. The loss of cultural practices and the forced adoption of the languages and customs of their captors contributed to a profound sense of dislocation and alienation.[46]

Upon arrival in the Americas, the process of identity erasure continued. Enslaved Africans were often given new names by their owners, severing the final link to their personal histories. They were dispersed across plantations, further isolating them from others who shared their heritage. This fragmentation was intended to prevent the formation of strong, cohesive communities that could resist oppression. Enslaved individuals were also subjected to constant surveillance and brutal punishment, reinforcing the power dynamics that kept them subjugated and compliant.

The loss of identity experienced by enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage had long-lasting effects. It hindered their ability to pass down cultural knowledge and traditions to future generations, resulting in a cultural disconnection that persists to

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[45] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 14.

[46] Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38.

this day.[47] Despite these efforts to erase their identities, enslaved Africans exhibited remarkable resilience. They found ways to preserve elements of their heritage, creating new cultural expressions that blended African traditions with their new realities. This cultural resilience laid the foundation for rich and diverse African diaspora cultures that continue to thrive.[48]

The Middle Passage initiated a process of identity erasure, where slaves were stripped of their names, languages, and histories to be remade into property. This loss of personal and cultural identity deepened the emotional trauma and complicated the mourning process, as slaves grieved not only the loss of family and friends to death but also their sense of self. The removal of an individual's cultural settings was a profound source of grief.

The grief resulting from the Middle Passage continues to resonate within the African diaspora. It has had a lasting impact on the cultural, social, and psychological experiences of African descendants in the Americas. The grief and trauma from this historical atrocity are often reflected in art, literature, music, and cultural expressions that address themes of loss, identity, and resilience.[49]

The Black Church and Grief of Loss Due to the Middle Passage Experience

Enslaved Africans faced extreme violence, dehumanization, and profound loss during this voyage, leaving deep psychological scars. Amidst this immense suffering, the

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[47] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 210.

[48] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 210.

[49] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 211.

Black Church emerged as a vital institution, providing spiritual solace, communal support, and a framework for understanding and coping with grief.

It provided a crucial space where enslaved Africans could find spiritual and emotional support. The Church became a sanctuary where they could express their grief, seek solace, and find a sense of community.

The roots of the Black Church can be traced back to secret meetings of enslaved Africans. Despite the risks, enslaved Africans created "invisible churches" in forests, cabins, and secluded areas where they could pray, sing, and share their sorrows. These secret "hush harbors" allowed the enslaved people to grieve their losses while seeking spiritual solace.[50] Enslaved Africans also brought with them a rich tapestry of religious beliefs and practices. These traditions were adapted and syncretized with Christianity, creating a unique religious experience that resonated deeply with the enslaved population.

Addressing Grief

The Black Church played a multifaceted role in helping enslaved Africans cope with their grief. The church became a space for communal gathering, a repository of cultural memory, and a beacon of hope and resilience.

One of the most significant contributions of the Black Church was its role in fostering a sense of community. The Black church became a surrogate family for many enslaved and later free individuals, providing a sense of belonging and support.[51] In the face of the systemic efforts to dehumanize and isolate enslaved individuals, the Church

[50] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 102.

[51] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 185.

provided a counter-narrative, emphasizing the dignity, humanity, and interconnectedness of its members.[52]

Communal worship was a cornerstone of this community support. The act of coming together for worship provided a sense of belonging and solidarity. Hymns, prayers, and sermons often spoke directly to the experiences and emotions of the congregation, offering a shared space for mourning and healing. This support extended beyond spiritual guidance to include material assistance, such as sharing food and caring for the sick. The Black Church played a critical role in preserving and adapting African cultural identities. This cultural continuity was essential for maintaining a sense of self and community amidst the disorienting and dehumanizing experience of slavery.

Many Black Churches incorporated African spiritual practices, such as call-and-response singing, drumming, and dance, into their worship services.[53] These practices provided a link to their cultural heritage and a means of expressing emotions that words could not capture. The Church also served as a repository for oral traditions, preserving stories, proverbs, and histories from African cultures.[54] These narratives helped maintain a sense of continuity and identity for the enslaved.

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[52] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 184.

[53] Thornton, *Africa and Africans*, 163.

[54] Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 142.

Perhaps most importantly, the Black Church offered a message of hope and resilience.[55] It provided a framework for understanding suffering and a vision of a better future, both in this life and the next.[56]

Biblical narratives, particularly the story of Exodus, resonated deeply with enslaved Africans.[57] The narrative of liberation from bondage and the promise of a promised land offered a powerful metaphor for their own hopes and struggles. Spirituals, a form of religious folk songs created by enslaved Africans, were another vital aspect of this hope. These songs, rich with coded messages and expressions of faith, provided a means of emotional release and a way to envision a future free from oppression.[58]

The Black Church played a crucial role in helping enslaved Africans cope with the grief and trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery. By providing a space for communal support, preserving cultural identities, and fostering hope and resilience, the Church offered a vital lifeline to those enduring unimaginable suffering. The legacy of these efforts continues to inform and inspire contemporary movements for justice and healing.

Conclusion

The Transatlantic Slave Trade represents one of the most profound and devastating events in human history, leaving an indelible mark on the cultural, social, and

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[55] Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 142.

[56] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks,* 201.

[57] Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks*, 201.

[58] Thornton, *Africa and Africans,* 162.

psychological fabric of African-descended peoples across the world. The forced displacement of millions of Africans, subjected to brutal dehumanization and extreme suffering, created a legacy of trauma that continues to shape contemporary discussions on race, identity, and justice. The Middle Passage, in particular, symbolized more than just the physical transportation of enslaved individuals—it was a journey marked by unspeakable grief, loss, and the systematic erasure of identity. The psychological and emotional scars left by this experience not only affected those who endured it firsthand but also reverberated through subsequent generations, influencing cultural memory and historical consciousness.

Despite the overwhelming pain and destruction caused by the slave trade, the resilience of enslaved Africans and their descendants is evident in their ability to preserve cultural traditions, forge new identities, and build strong, enduring communities. Enslaved individuals, despite their suffering, found ways to resist complete cultural erasure by developing new expressions of faith, music, language, and communal structures. The emergence of the Black Church as a spiritual and social institution provided a vital space for those who had been stripped of their families, histories, and cultural ties. It became a refuge where enslaved Africans could grieve, find solace, and regain a sense of agency through worship, communal support, and shared resilience.

The grief and trauma experienced during the Middle Passage were not isolated to individual suffering but extended to the collective pain of entire communities. The loss of familial bonds, cultural traditions, and personal autonomy created an enduring sense of dislocation that continues to influence the African diaspora. Yet, from the ashes of this immense loss, enslaved Africans and their descendants cultivated new cultural forms,

traditions, and institutions that have contributed significantly to global history. The endurance of African spiritual practices and communal values serves as a testament to the strength and perseverance of those who survived one of history's greatest atrocities.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

A young man wakes up and begins to start his day. As he thinks about his day, he thinks about all the possibilities that a new day brings. He prepares to leave. As he leaves the house, he sees his father sitting on the couch. The young man makes a joke to his father, and his father laughs. Never does the young man suspect that these would be the last words that he would ever speak to his father. Later that evening, his father dies suddenly. The young man is left feeling lost. There is a darkness that encamps him. He has questions. However, there is no one there to provide answers. Friends and neighbors called and visited initially, but they have all departed now. Members of the church he attends called to check on him in the beginning. Now, even those calls are few and far between. He is left all alone with his thoughts. He becomes angry with everyone, including God. Anger turns into depression. As time goes on, depression turns into isolation. He has heard people tell him to move on and be strong. Each time he tries, he seems to sink deeper and deeper. He continues to attend church, hoping to find comfort. The reality is that attending church does not ease the pain that he feels each time he thinks about his father. He begins to wonder if things will ever get better or if he will have to carry this feeling alone for the rest of his life.

Grief is a complex emotional response to loss, particularly the loss of someone or something deeply significant.[1] It encompasses a wide range of emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, and confusion, and can affect individuals physically, mentally, and spiritually.[2] Grief is a natural reaction to significant loss and is often characterized by an intense longing for the deceased, preoccupation with memories, and a sense of yearning. William Worden offers a comprehensive exploration of grief in his work, emphasizing its emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions. He describes grief as a natural reaction to loss that encompasses a wide range of emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, and confusion.[3] Worden also highlights how grief can arise from various types of losses beyond death, such as the end of relationships, changes in health, or job loss, and is often marked by longing, preoccupation with memories, and a deep sense of yearning.[4]

Grief is more than just a temporary emotional response; it is a multifaceted process that involves adapting to loss and seeking a sense of equilibrium. Worden suggests that grief is not just about experiencing certain feelings but also involves tasks that the individual must undertake to adjust to their loss. Worden describes a model that indicates that grieving is an active process. He suggests that the four tasks of mourning are accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain of grief, adjusting to

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[1] William J. Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company, 2009), 5.

[2] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 34.

[3] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy,* 50.

[4] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy,* 75.

life without the deceased, and finding a way to maintain connection while moving forward with life.[5] Grief reflects love and attachment, even as it is a painful reminder of loss.

Grief is not just an emotional and psychological experience. Grief is also a spiritual journey. Along this journey, questions about the meaning of life, death, and suffering arise. In his book *Lament for a Son,* Nicholas Woltrstorff writes on the spiritual aspect of his own grief, stating, "I shall look at the world through tears. Perhaps I shall see things that dry-eyed I could not see."[6] He further captured the dual nature of grief when he spoke about the grief he felt at the loss of his son. Wolterstorff writes, "The pain of the no longer is part of the joy of the once was."[7] Grief reflects love and attachment, even as it is a painful reminder of loss. It is in the face of this spiritual journey that the church should play an important role.

Many people travel the spiritual journey alone. As a result, they sink into a dark abyss that can be difficult to navigate. When describing the loneliness of grief, the Hospice Foundation states that loneliness is a natural part of grief, and it is one of the more trying aspects of accepting a loss. "When a loved one dies, a hole is left that no one and nothing else can fill. It is as if no one else can know or understand. The intense and mixed feelings of grief can lead to separation and isolation from others."[8] This should not be the case. Those suffering from grief should not have to go on their spiritual

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[5] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy,* 86.

[6] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 23.

[7] Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 34.

[8] Hospice Foundation of America, "The Loneliness of Loss," Hospice Foundation, https://hospicefoundation.org/the-loneliness-of-loss/.

journey alone. Megan Devine discusses this idea in her book, *It's Ok That You're Not OK*. Devine writes that as people go through grief, they need someone to see it, to acknowledge it. "You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there in blinking horror, staring at the hole that was your life."[9] The church should become that hand-holding entity.

Galatians 6:2 states that Christians should "bear on another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." The phrase "to bear" can mean to take up or carry away. The word "burden" can mean weight. In other words, Christians should take up or carry away the weight that others are carrying. No one should go through situations alone. God expects the church to be a place where its members comfort and strengthen one another, especially in times of trial and difficulty. However, an overwhelming number of faith communities have missed the mark in their call to minister to the grieving. Instead of finding the church a source of strength and comfort, many people find the church the hardest place to return to after suffering loss. Some find the worship experience too much for them to handle. Some feel uncomfortable moving about in large groups. Others discover their church is ill-equipped to support their deep, ongoing needs of care. As a result, they move from the front row of the church to the back and then out the door. They move from serving and singing in the choir to solitude and silent sobbing. The call for the church to care for people by sharing one another's burdens should also include a grief support and recovery ministry.

The biblical foundation for the project can be determined through navigating the scriptures. The Bible speaks often about providing comfort to those who mourn. In Isaiah

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[9] Megan Devine, *It's Ok That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2017), Kindle edition.

61:1-2, the prophet declares that he has been sent to "bind up the brokenhearted" and to "comfort all who mourn." Here, the prophet establishes the idea that those who mourn should not mourn alone. However, Jesus establishes the biblical foundation in His Sermon on the Mount. It is here that He confirmed the idea of providing comfort for those who grieve. In Matthew 5:4, He says, "blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted." Therefore, it is in this chapter that the theological foundation for the project will be laid.

Many theologies address the idea of grief and suffering. A major aspect of Martin Luther's theology, the Theology of the Cross, emphasizes that God is revealed most clearly in suffering, particularly through the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It teaches that God does not remove suffering but enters it, sharing in human pain and offering hope through solidarity.[10] This theology offers comfort by affirming that God is fully present in times of suffering and that grief is not a sign of divine abandonment. The cross shows that God is closest to humanity in moments of deep sorrow, providing spiritual and emotional reassurance. The cross, for believers, is a beacon of hope and meaning in their suffering, knowing that God suffers alongside them. However, the Theology of the Cross does not allow for sharing grief.

Jürgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope is centered on the idea that the resurrection of Christ is the foundation of Christian hope. Moltmann emphasizes that God is deeply involved in human suffering but offers the promise of future redemption and new creation through the resurrection. He writes in *The Crucified God*, "God weeps with us so

[10] Robert Wilkinson, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius* (London, UK: T and T Clark, 2015), 78.

that we may one day laugh with him."[11] This theology is eschatological, pointing toward a future where God will make all things new and overcome suffering and death. This theology provides a framework for enduring grief by pointing toward the future fulfillment of God's promises. It helps those in grief to see beyond their present suffering to a hope-filled future where God's justice and healing will prevail. The resurrection becomes a symbol of ultimate hope, showing that suffering is not the final word. This theology becomes problematic when those who grieve struggle to see a hope-filled future because of the pain that is felt daily.

Rooted in the experiences of oppressed communities, particularly in Latin America (Gustavo Gutiérrez) and African American contexts (James Cone), Liberation Theology emphasizes God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone writes, "The crucifixion of Jesus was a first-century lynching. It was an act of terror by the Roman Empire to keep the Jewish people in their place."[12] Cone argues that God identifies with those who suffer from systemic injustices and that liberation from oppression is at the heart of the Gospel. This theology offers a way to understand suffering as personal and communal, especially in contexts of racial, economic, or social injustice. For individuals or communities grieving under the weight of systemic oppression, Liberation Theology speaks directly to their experiences, offering both hope and a call to action. It challenges the church to be a place of healing and justice, actively working to alleviate the sources of communal grief. However, Cone's

[11] Jürgen Moltman, *The Crucified God* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1974), Kindle edition, 50.

[12] James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 31.

theology is specific to the context of racial oppression and liberation, thus it fails to be inclusive to all.

Communal Theology offers a practical foundation for the establishment of a grief support and recovery ministry in the church. The holistic well-being of its members should be at the forefront of everything that the church does, including providing grief support. This indicates that any foundational theology on grief must address the issue of loneliness. While other theologies address grief and suffering, Communal Theology best addresses this issue. A major part of Communal Theology is the emphasis on the Christian community. The Christian community is a primary expression of faith, where mutual care, shared responsibility, and collective worship reflect the teachings of Christ. Communal Theology is rooted in early Christian practices and later developed by theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Stanley Hauerwas, and John Zizioulas.

Communal Theology Origins

Communal Theology examines how community shapes Christian identity and spirituality. The origins of Communal Theology can be traced back to the early Christian communities as described in the Book of Acts. Acts 2:42-47 states:

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved (Acts 2:42-47).

The picture that this scripture recalls is a church that emphasized collective living, shared resources, and mutual care. Early Christians held to a belief that their shared life

reflected the body of Christ. Paul later described the "body of Christ" in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27. In this pericope, Paul emphasizes that the church is one body with many members, all interconnected. Later, this emphasis on community was reflected in the monastic movement in the sixth century.

The monastic figure, St. Benedict of Nursia, organized monastic communities based on shared work, worship, and prayer.[13] These communities embodied a communal life that emphasized the interdependence of each member. In his "Rule of St. Benedict," Benedict stressed that monastic life was about living together in love and mutual service.[14] This idea has formed the basis of modern communal theology. The communal life of the monastic tradition provided a model of living centered on Christian values. This model became the building block on which later theologians would define the church's communal identity. Another contributor to the foundations of Communal Theology is Martin Luther.

The Protestant Reformer Martin Luther emphasized what he referred to as the "priesthood of all believers."[15] Luther focused on congregational worship and mutual care, reinforcing the idea that the church is a community where believers share in each other's burdens and support one another. Although Luther did not explicitly develop communal theology, his teachings laid important groundwork for modern theologians John Zizioulas, Stanley Hauerwas, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

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[13] Wilkinson, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius,* 25.

[14] Wilkinson, *The Early Christians in Ephesus from Paul to Ignatius,*78.

[15] Martin Luther, "The Heidelberg Disputation," Presented at the Lecture Hall of the Augustinian Order, Heidelberg, Germany, April 26, 1518.

John Zizioulas and the Ontology of Communion

John Zizioulas, an Eastern Orthodox theologian, contributed to communal theology by exploring the ontological basis of community. In "Being as Communion," Zizioulas argues that human identity is fundamentally relational, shaped by the experience of communion with others. He writes, "Personhood is realized in and through relationship; it is an ontological reality which becomes manifest in communion."[16] God exists as a Trinity of persons in a perfect relationship. The church, for Zizioulas reflects this communal nature of God.

Zizioulas emphasizes the Eucharist as the central expression of the church's communal life. In the Eucharist, believers come together to experience unity with Christ and with one another. For Zizioulas, Communal Theology is about living in a community and participating in the divine life through sacramental worship, which unites individuals in a shared identity as the body of Christ.[17]

Stanley Hauerwas and Countercultural Church

Stanley Hauerwas expands Communal Theology by describing the church as a countercultural community that embodies the teachings of Jesus in a world shaped by individualism and consumerism. Hauerwas emphasized that the church is a distinct community that lives counter to the broader culture. The Christian community should be a visible witness to the world, embodying such values as peace, justice, and

[16] John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 18.

[17] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion,* 23.

hospitality.[18] In "Resident Aliens," co-authored with William Willimon, Hauerwas argues, "The church does not exist to provide an ethos for democracy or any other form of social organization, but stands as a political alternative to every nation."[19]

For Hauerwas, communal theology is not merely a theory but a way of life that challenges society's norms and embodies a distinct ethical vision. The narrative of Jesus Christ forms this vision. Hauerwas stated that being a Christian means participating in a communal fellowship of faith that shapes identity, ethics, and mission.[20] Through this fellowship, the church becomes a space where believers learn to live out the radical teachings of Jesus Christ, allowing the church to witness to the world through its countercultural practices.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Life Together

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is arguably the key figure in the development of Communal Theology in the twentieth century. Bonhoeffer argues that Christian life is inherently communal. He explores this Christian Community concept, stating that Christ's life is meant to be shared.[21] In his work entitled *Life Together*, he writes, "The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes entangled in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to have a man by himself."[22] For Bonhoeffer, the Christian community is essential it allows believers to

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[18] Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 89.

[19] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 96.

[20] Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens,* 103.

[21] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1954), 100.

experience the presence of Christ in each other through shared worship and service. The Christian community also provides a space where individuals can confess their sins, share their burdens, and grow in faith together. Bonhoeffer's vision of community is shaped by his belief that Christians are called to reflect the relational nature of God as revealed in Christ.[23]

Bonhoeffer's theology stresses that the Christian community must bear one another's burdens, as outlined in Galatians 6:2. Galatians 6:2 encourages followers of Christ to bear one another's burdens. This call to shared responsibility is not optional but integral to discipleship. Bonhoeffer challenges believers to embrace "costly grace," which he describes as the grace that demands self-sacrifice and communal accountability.[24] In this way, Communal Theology calls believers to support one another through authentic relationships grounded in mutual care and shared sacrifice.

Bonhoeffer's vision of the church as a place where believers are called to bear one another's burdens influenced subsequent theologians, who also emphasized the importance of community in Christian life. His concept of Communal Theology was deeply shaped by his experiences with the Confessing Church and his time at Finkenwalde, where he led a seminary that emphasized communal living.

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[22] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

[23] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 100.

[24] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1959), 45.

Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church

The Confessing Church began as a movement within the German Protestant Church that resisted the Nazification of Christianity during the 1930s and 1040s.[25] Many German Christians embraced Nazism, and the Nazi-aligned "German Christian" movement sought to align church doctrine with Nazi ideology. The Confessing Church sought to preserve the theological and spiritual integrity of Christianity by rejecting state interference in church affairs. The Confessing Church, most importantly, wanted to maintain allegiance to the teachings of Jesus Christ rather than to any political power. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a prominent leader in this movement. His writings reflect his deep theological convictions regarding the Confessing church's role in maintaining the integrity of the gospel. A key moment in forming the Confessing Church occurred in 1934.

The Barmen Declaration was drafted in 1934. Theologian Karl Barth and others wrote this declaration. The Barmen Declaration was a clear repudiation of the German Christian movement and the Nazi regime's attempt to co-opt Christianity. Bonhoeffer was a chief supporter of the Barmen Declaration. The declaration reflected his theological stance on the need for the church to resist any government or ideology that contradicted the teachings of Christ. In the Barmen Declaration, the Confessing Church declared, "We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires,

[25] Charles Marsh, *Strange Glory: A Life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 77-79.

purposes and plans."[26] This statement reflected the church's theological foundation that the church's loyalty must be to Christ alone.

In *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer writes about the Confessing Church's call to a different kind of community—one rooted in genuine discipleship rather than cultural conformity. He states, "The Church is the Church only when it exists for others … not dominating, but helping and serving."[27] Bonhoeffer further expounded on the theological responsibility of the church. For Bonhoeffer, true discipleship required obedience to Christ even in the face of persecution and suffering. He writes, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."[28] In opposition to "cheap grace" is what Bonhoeffer termed as "costly grace." "Costly grace" is the grace of true discipleship, which demands a willingness to follow Christ even at great personal cost.[29]

The Confessing Church, in Bonhoeffer's theology, was the embodiment of costly grace, refusing to compromise with the state and choosing instead to suffer for the sake of the gospel. The Confessing Church's stance against Nazi ideology demonstrated the power of communal faith and resistance, influencing Bonhoeffer's belief that the church must be a distinct, countercultural community. The Confessing Church experience shaped Bonhoeffer's Communal Theology, as he witnessed firsthand the dangers of a church that compromised its values for political gain.

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[26] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 14.

[27] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 34.

[28] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

[29] Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 47.

Finkenwalde: An Experiment in Christian Community

In 1935, Bonhoeffer was appointed to become the director of an underground seminary for the Confessing Church in Finkenwalde, a small village in Pomerania.[30] This seminary was established to train pastors who were committed to the Confessing Church principles. Here, he sought to put his communal theology into practice.

He created a living, breathing example of a Christian community that mirrored the principles of shared life, prayer, and mutual accountability. Many of Bonhoeffer's ideas about the Christian community were developed here and later articulated in the book *Life Together*.

At Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer's students lived in a close-knit community, engaging in daily prayers, confession, shared meals, and theological study. The idea of bearing one another's burdens became central to Bonhoeffer's Communal Theology, as he emphasized that the Christian community involves supporting one another spiritually and practically. In *Life Together*, Bonhoeffer writes, "The Christian, however, must bear the burden of a brother. He must suffer and endure the brother."[31] Bonhoeffer believed that pastors of the Confessing Church should be equipped with theological knowledge and spiritual strength to resist outside pressures. He saw Finkenwalde as a place where future pastors could learn what it meant to follow Christ in a world that demanded compromise.

Bonhoeffer instituted times of silence, scripture meditation, and confession to foster personal reflection and a deeper sense of accountability among the

[30] Marsh, *Strange Glory,* 77-79.

[31] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 100.

seminarians. He reflects on these practices, particularly the importance of confession and accountability: "In confession the break-through to community takes place … Confession in the presence of a brother is the profoundest kind of humiliation. It hurts, it cuts a man down, it is a dreadful blow to pride."[32] This emphasis on confession at Finkenwalde reflected Bonhoeffer's belief that humility, transparency, and shared responsibility were essential for a faithful Christian community.

Finkenwalde had a lasting impact on Bonhoeffer's theology, particularly his views on the Christian community. The seminary's structure and routine became the foundation for his book *Life Together,* where he articulates his vision for a Christ-centered community marked by mutual support, humility, and shared spiritual practices.[33] Bonhoeffer believed that a true Christian community was countercultural and required a radical commitment to discipleship. One of the most significant lessons from Finkenwalde was the idea that the Christian community exists to serve and support one another in faithfulness to Christ rather than to adapt to the values of the world.

Communal Theology

A Communal Theology addresses the needs of those suffering from grief. Grieving individuals often face emotional, spiritual, and relational challenges that can feel overwhelming. It emphasizes the church as a space for shared burdens, mutual support, and collective healing. For those in grief, the presence of a supportive

[32] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 112.

[33] Marsh, *Strange Glory,* 112-115.

community provides not only practical assistance but also spiritual companionship. Communal Theology provides a framework for the church to respond effectively. Communal Theology teaches that the church is called to carry each other's burdens, creating a network of support for those who are grieving. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *Life Together* that "The Christian must bear the burden of a brother … Only as a burden is the other really a brother and not merely an object to be manipulated.[34] For those in grief, this support means they cannot navigate their sorrow alone; the church community walks with them, offering empathy and companionship.

Communal Theology emphasizes the importance of being present and listening to one another, which is particularly beneficial for those dealing with grief. The practice of presence—simply being with someone in their sorrow—is a powerful way to provide comfort without attempting to "fix" the problem. Knowing that someone is willing to sit with them, listen to their pain, and witness their suffering is profoundly comforting for those in grief. Stanley Hauerwas describes the church as a "community of patience" that can sit with people through pain and grief without necessarily needing to explain or justify suffering.[35] This ministry of presence allows the church to meet grieving individuals where they are, offering a non-judgmental space where they can express their emotions freely and find companionship in their sorrow.

Communal Theology fosters an environment where lament and vulnerability are embraced, offering a safe place for individuals to grieve openly. In the church community, people are encouraged to bring their pain and doubts, as seen in the Psalms

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[34] Bonhoeffer, *Life Together,* 100.

[35] Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 68-71.

and other scriptural examples of lament. The Bible provides numerous examples of lament, showing that it is a natural part of the faith journey. Communal Theology acknowledges that believers may go through seasons of questioning, sadness, and anger, and it creates a space where these emotions are accepted. Nicholas Wolterstorff, in *Lament for a Son*, captures this idea by sharing his own raw expressions of grief after the loss of his son. He writes, "The pain of the no longer is part of the joy of the once was."[36] Communal Theology supports grief ministry by offering a place where mourners can express this kind of honest lament, knowing they are surrounded by a community that listens, understands, and empathizes.

Communal Theology emphasizes the importance of rituals and shared practices that foster healing and a sense of continuity. In grief ministry, rituals such as communal prayers, lighting candles, remembering loved ones in worship, and celebrating memorial services are ways that the community can collectively support those in mourning. These rituals provide structure and continuity for the bereaved, offering them a sense of stability and comfort.

John Zizioulas highlights the importance of communal worship and the Eucharist, arguing that community rituals connect believers to one another and to God.[37] For the grieving, communal practices can honor the memory of the deceased and remind them that they are part of a larger, supportive community. These practices provide opportunities for collective mourning, symbolizing that the community shares in the grief and upholds the mourner.

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[36] Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 34.

[37] Zizioulas, *Being as Communion,* 75-77.

Grief is a journey that often requires long-term support. Communal Theology provides a foundation for ongoing care. Unlike secular grief resources, which may offer temporary support, a church grounded in Communal Theology remains a consistent presence for the bereaved, providing support long after the initial mourning period. This long-term commitment reflects the communal nature of the church, which sees each member as interconnected and invested in one another's well-being.

Bonhoeffer emphasized the church as a place where believers are sustained by one another, saying, "The Christian cannot simply bear his burden alone; he must rely on others to be his brothers and sisters."[38] For those grieving, this means that the church continues to offer support, companionship, and prayer over time, reinforcing that they are part of a community that will not abandon them in their pain.

Communal Theology offers a space for grievers to engage in spiritual reflection and seek meaning in their loss within the context of faith. In grief, individuals often wrestle with questions about God, suffering, and the afterlife. Communal Theology encourages the church to accompany the bereaved on this journey, offering a supportive environment where they can explore these questions without fear or judgment.

By providing this theological framework, the church allows those grieving to move toward a renewed sense of faith, even if that journey includes periods of doubt or questioning. Communal Theology sees the church as a "fellowship of believers" who help each other grow through all life's seasons, including grief and suffering. Communal Theology reminds us that faith communities have a critical role in providing emotional

[38] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, 24.

and spiritual support, helping individuals navigate the complexities of grief in the context of shared faith.

Communal Theology in the twenty-first century addresses the unique challenges and opportunities of modern Christian life by re-emphasizing the church's role as a place of mutual support, shared responsibility, and collective action. In a time characterized by increasing individualism, digital connectivity, and social fragmentation, communal theology has taken on new relevance as it provides a framework for believers to experience faith in the context of relationships and community. In the twenty-first century, Communal Theology offers the church a vital framework for fostering meaningful connections, responding to social justice issues, and maintaining spiritual practices amid modern challenges. By emphasizing the importance of shared life, Communal Theology invites the church to resist the isolation of individualism, embrace the opportunities of digital fellowship, and provide a countercultural witness to a fragmented world.

In a time when authentic community is both rare and deeply desired, Communal Theology calls the church to be a place of mutual support, accountability, and compassion, offering a model of the Body of Christ that is relevant, resilient, and transformative. That is not right. Communal Theology equips the church to meet the needs of those suffering from grief by providing a supportive, compassionate, and enduring community. By focusing on shared burdens, rituals, presence, and long-term care, Communal Theology offers a framework for grief ministry that is holistic, relational, and spiritually rich. This approach reflects the heart of the Christian message:

that believers are called to love one another and carry each other's burdens, embodying God's compassion and grace to those who mourn.

Conclusion

This chapter explores the theological foundations of grief, suffering, and communal responsibility within the church. Grief is not a singular or isolated experience; it is a deep human journey that encompasses emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions. The church, as the body of Christ, has a divine mandate to be a place of refuge, healing, and restoration for those who mourn. However, many faith communities struggle to provide adequate support, leaving grieving individuals feeling abandoned in their suffering. This study has emphasized that grief should not be endured alone, but rather within the nurturing embrace of a compassionate and engaged Christian community.

Various theological perspectives provide insight into the role of suffering and grief in the Christian journey. The Theology of the Cross affirms that God is fully present in human suffering, demonstrating His solidarity with those who mourn. The Theology of Hope offers assurance that grief is not the final word, as the resurrection of Christ provides the ultimate promise of renewal and restoration. Liberation Theology expands this understanding by connecting grief to communal suffering, highlighting the need for justice, advocacy, and systemic change. However, these theological frameworks, while valuable, often fall short in addressing the deeply personal and relational aspects of grief within the context of the local church.

Communal Theology emerges as a vital approach to grief ministry, emphasizing the interconnectedness of believers and the responsibility of the church to bear one another's burdens. Inspired by the early Christian communities described in Acts, as well as the theological contributions of John Zizioulas, Stanley Hauerwas, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Communal Theology provides a robust foundation for grief support and recovery within the church. It challenges the individualistic tendencies of modern culture and calls the church back to its biblical roots as a community of faith, where no one suffers alone.

Bonhoeffer's vision of Christian community, articulated in *Life Together*, reinforces the necessity of shared suffering, mutual accountability, and intentional presence. The church is not merely a gathering of individuals but a living organism that thrives through deep, committed relationships. The experience of the Confessing Church and the Finkenwalde seminary illustrates the power of communal faith in sustaining believers during times of trial. These historical examples serve as a model for contemporary churches, urging them to create spaces where those who grieve are supported, not just in the immediate aftermath of loss but throughout the entire journey of healing.

Practical applications of Communal Theology in grief ministry include fostering a culture of presence, where church members actively engage with those who are mourning through listening, prayer, and companionship. Rituals such as communal lament, memorial services, and shared meals provide structured ways for the church to honor loss and affirm the dignity of those who grieve. Furthermore, long-term support mechanisms,

such as grief support groups, pastoral care, and ongoing discipleship, ensure that grieving individuals are continually embraced by the community.

Ultimately, Communal Theology offers the church a renewed vision of what it means to be a faithful community in a world marked by suffering and loss. By embracing this framework, the church can reclaim its role as a sanctuary of support and recovery to those who grieve.

CHAPTER FIVE

INTERDISCIPLINARY FOUNDATIONS

Introduction

Many churches have mastered the concept of praise and worship. Tremendous effort goes into making sure that the worship service is "on point." Praise teams rehearse tirelessly to make sure that the songs are sung to the best of their ability. Technology teams conduct pre-service tests to ensure all the microphones and audio-visual equipment work properly. Preachers consistently review their sermons to ensure the word will be smoothly and flawlessly delivered. Praise and worship churches have this down to a science. Most churches can pass this test with flying colors. However, many churches fail as it relates to ministry. Ministry is not what happens on Sunday morning during worship hour. Ministry is what takes place during the week. When considering how churches historically have provided ministry, there is a need for a shift. Many churches are continuing to provide a singular, focused approach to ministry. Ministry is primarily Spirit focused. The main focus is to ensure they have a "good church." While spirit-focused ministry may be a large aspect of what the church does, this approach is problematic. The problem lies in the fact that human beings are not solely spiritual. Human beings are also mental, emotional, and physical. To neglect these aspects is to create a flawed approach to ministry. If the church is going to truly live out its disciple-making mission, it must become more holistic in its approach to ministry.

Holistic ministry seeks to embed the gospel in every aspect of life. This means holistic ministry engages the whole person, spiritual, physical, and relational, with the whole gospel.[1] By intersecting worship, discipleship and fellowship and fellowship with good life choices, meaningful relationships, a healthy family, and good character, people are able to experience God's transforming love more fully.[2] It is God's transforming love as displayed by holistic church ministry that helps to provide recovery to those that grieve. This project contends that if a group comprising clerical ministers and lay leaders participates in an educational workshop about the fundamentals of grief, then they will be equipped to create and operate a grief support and recovery ministry.

In the biblical chapter, there is a concise examination of Matthew 5:4. Jesus is giving a sermon that will extend throughout the seventh chapter. This sermon is what will later be called the Sermon on the Mount. It is in this sermon that Jesus lays the foundation for Christian ethics. The sermon opens with what has been called the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes describe the blessings that follow believers who live their lives manifesting the values that God deems important. In Matthew 5:4, Jesus says a word to those suffering from grief. Jesus declares that those who mourn will receive comfort. Comfort means strength and fortification, both of which lead to recovery.

In the historical foundations chapter, grief is examined through the historical event of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, more specifically, the journey of African slaves to the New World via the Middle Passage. The Middle Passage was a horrendous voyage in

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[1] David Kool and Andrew Ryskamp, *Leading in Holistic Ministry Complete Guide* (New York, NY: Reformed Church Press, 2015), 1, https://www.faithward.org/leading-in-holistic-ministry/.

[2] Kool and Ryskamp, *Leading in Holistic Ministry Complete Guide*, 1.

which African slaves were forced to deal with death and grief on every hand. Whether at the hands of the European crew or the terrible conditions on the ships, death was ever-present. The African slaves did not just grieve due to the loss of the lives of their family, but the loss of their community as well as their identity. During this period, nearly two million African lives were lost.

The theological foundation's chapter on grief support and recovery is viewed through the scope of Communal Theology. There are several theological theories that speak about grief. James Cone's Liberation Theology and Jurgen Moltmann's Theology of Hope both present ideas that center around grief and loss. However, Communal Theology, as presented by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, provides the theological foundation to support this project. Bonhoeffer's theology emphasized the idea that as the Christian community, believers are called to bear one another's burdens. Mutual care and shared sacrifice are pillars on which Bonhoeffer's theology is built. These ideals are also the foundations in which a grief support and recovery ministry can be created and sustained.

This chapter will take a deep look at Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief model and how it applies to grief support and recovery. The Five Stages of Grief will provide the church with an understanding of the possible stages that members who are suffering from grief may enter. Having this knowledge will give the church an understanding of how to minister to them. Ministering to them in this way helps to maintain a healthy congregation. Congregational health is one of the most important aspects of church growth. "The people of God cannot reach out effectively if they are hurting … If you don't have healthy people then you don't have a healthy approach

to ministry."[3] This chapter will also examine the psychological and sociological foundations of the Kubler-Ross model.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was a Swiss American psychiatrist, author, and leader in studying death, dying, and grief. Ross's work was a shaping force in the study of thanatology. Her work introduced a compassionate approach to understanding the emotional needs of terminally ill patients. As a child, Ross demonstrated a desire to help others. She volunteered to assist refugees after World War II. This experience profoundly influenced her decision to pursue a career in medicine.[4]

While studying medicine at the University of Zurich, she earned her Doctor of Medicine in 1957. During her training, she encountered patients facing terminal illnesses, which sparked her interest in understanding how individuals cope with the knowledge of their impending death.[5] In 1958, Ross moved to the United States, where she continued her medical training in psychiatry. While working as a psychiatrist at hospitals in New York and Chicago, she observed that the emotional needs of terminally ill patients were often being ignored. Kubler-Ross began giving seminars on death and dying, which laid the foundation for her later work.[6]

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[3] Philip Olson, Ronald Sider, and Heidi Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 167.

[4] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *The Wheel of Life: A Memoir of Living and Dying* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1997), 9-11.

[5] Kirk Schneider, *Elisabeth Kubler-Ross: Encountering Death and Dying* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15-17.

[6] Kubler-Ross, *The Wheel of Life*, 47-50.

In 1969, Kubler-Ross published her famous work, *On Death and Dying*. The book was based on her interviews with terminally ill patients. The book introduces the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance now known as the Kubler-Ross model. Although it was originally developed to describe the experiences of terminally ill patients, the model has been applied to various forms of loss.[7] Her work encouraged medical professionals to view death as a natural part of life and to provide holistic care to patients and their families.[8]

Kubler-Ross Model

The Kubler-Ross model outlines the five stages of grief. Originally developed to describe the process of terminally ill patients, it has been widely applied across disciplines. While this model is widely known in other disciplines, it can be adapted to include spiritual perspectives at each stage in a church context. Infusing spiritual perspectives, such as faith, allows believers to build a bridge to trusting God's plan.

The origin of this model began with interviews and observations. At the time, topics such as death and dying were taboo in Western society. Healthcare professionals were often unprepared to help patients process their own impending deaths. Kubler-Ross aimed to open these conversations and provide a framework to understand the emotions associated with dying and grief.[9] Kubler-Ross's model became known as The Five Stages of Grief. These stages described the five emotional stages that many patients

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[7] Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 2011), 21-23.

[8] Schneider, *Elisabeth Kubler-Ross: Encountering Death and Dying*, 35-37.

[9] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 21-23.

exhibited. These stages were not intended to be rigid or linear but to serve to conceptualize common responses to grief and loss.[10]

The Five Stages of Grief

Denial

Denial is often the first reaction to loss. This reaction is characterized by disbelief or avoidance. This stage serves as a temporary defense mechanism. The defense mechanism is designed to allow individuals time to process the shock of the situation. An example may be a person's refusal to accept a terminal diagnosis or believe that a loved one has passed away. Kubler-Ross stated that "Denial functions as a buffer after unexpected shocking news … It is a temporary defense and will soon be replaced by partial acceptance."[11]

Anger

"When the first stage of denial cannot be maintained any longer, it is replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy, and resentment."[12] A person's anger can be directed at themselves, others, or even a higher power. It is a way of expressing the pain associated with loss.[13]

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[10] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 24.

[11] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 38.

[12] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 49.

[13] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 49.

Bargaining

Bargaining involves attempts to regain control or change the outcome of the situation. In many cases, bargaining is done through negotiations or making promises. This stage frequently includes "what if" or "if only" statements as individuals attempt to delay or postpone grief. Kubler-Ross observed that "the patient may attempt to enter into some sort of deal or agreement which may postpone the inevitable."[14] Bargaining reflects the human desire to make sense of a loss or to delay its impact by seeking solutions or alternatives, even if unrealistic.[15]

Depression

Depression occurs when the individual begins to confront the reality of the loss. It is marked by deep sadness, despair, and withdrawal. This stage often involves grieving the loss of past and future possibilities.[16] Depression is often seen as the most difficult phase of grief because it requires facing the full emotional weight of the situation. Depression allows individuals to mourn what has been lost and to begin letting go of attachments to their old reality. Kubler-Ross defined it as "preparatory grief."[17]

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[14] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 72.

[15] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 73.

[16] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 85.

[17] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 85.

Acceptance

Acceptance is the final stage. In this stage, individuals come to terms with their loss. Acceptance is not about being "okay" with what happened but rather finding a way to live with the new reality.[18] It allows individuals to move forward with their lives while acknowledging the impact of the loss. Kubler-Ross stated, "Acceptance should not be mistaken for a happy stage … it is almost void of feeling."[19]

Psychological Foundation of the Kubler-Ross Model

The Kübler-Ross model's psychological foundation is rooted in a blend of humanistic, psychoanalytic, and existential theories, reflecting a comprehensive approach to understanding grief and loss. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross drew on these psychological principles to explore the emotional responses of terminally ill patients, highlighting the universal yet deeply personal nature of grief. Her work was heavily influenced by humanistic psychology's emphasis on individual growth and self-actualization and psychoanalytic concepts of mourning and attachment. Additionally, existential psychology's focus on meaning-making and the confrontation with mortality shaped her understanding of the stages of grief.

Psychoanalytic Influences

The Kübler-Ross model is also grounded in psychoanalytic theories of grief and loss, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud. In his work, *Mourning and Melancholia,*

[18] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 113.

[19] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 113.

Freud described mourning as a process of detaching emotional energy from the deceased or lost object, allowing the individual to reinvest that energy elsewhere.[20] Kübler-Ross's stages echo this process, particularly in the depression and acceptance stages, where individuals confront and integrate the reality of their loss.

Additionally, John Bowlby's attachment theory complements Freud's ideas, emphasizing the significance of bonds in human relationships. Bowlby posited that the disruption of attachment leads to predictable emotional responses, such as protest (anger), despair (depression), and eventual detachment or reorganization (acceptance).[21] Kübler-Ross's framework mirrors these stages, suggesting that grief is, in part, a response to severing emotional connections.

Humanistic Psychology and Existential Theory

Humanistic Psychology, which emphasizes personal growth and self-actualization, is one of the foundational influences on the Kübler-Ross model. This approach focuses on understanding individuals' subjective experiences and potential for growth, even in challenging circumstances. Kübler-Ross's stages of grief reflect this emphasis, acknowledging the emotional processes individuals must navigate to reach a state of acceptance and peace.

Carl Rogers's concept of unconditional positive regard and empathy significantly influenced Kübler-Ross's work. Rogers argued that individuals require empathetic

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[20] Sigmund Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia. In the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London, UK: Hogarth Press, 1917), 243-258.

[21] John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Loss, Sadness, and Depression*, vol. 3 (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1980), 14.

support to process their emotions and grow through adversity.[22] Similarly, Kübler-Ross emphasized the importance of empathetic listening and providing emotional space for terminally ill patients to express their fears and hopes. This aligns with the humanistic belief in the inherent worth of individuals and their ability to find meaning even in suffering.[23]

Existential Psychology and Meaning-Making

Existential psychology, with its focus on meaning-making and confronting mortality, also informs the Kübler-Ross model. Influenced by the work of Viktor Frankl and his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, Kübler-Ross believed that individuals must grapple with existential questions when faced with terminal illness or loss. Frankl argued that finding meaning in suffering is essential for psychological resilience, a concept reflected in the bargaining and acceptance stages of the model, where individuals search for purpose or resolution.[24]

Kübler-Ross's work also echoes existential themes in its acknowledgment of death as a fundamental human experience. By encouraging patients to confront their mortality, she provided a framework for individuals to derive meaning from their experiences, aligning with existential psychology's focus on self-awareness and authenticity.[25]

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[22] Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1961), 49.

[23] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 14.

[24] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press,1959), 113.

[25] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 20.

Behavioral Observations

Kübler-Ross's model is rooted in observational research, where she noted recurrent emotional patterns in patients facing terminal illness. She also observed that these stages were often experienced by family members of the deceased, suggesting the model's broader applicability to other forms of loss.[26] Beyond theoretical influences, the model is grounded in Kübler-Ross's observations of terminally ill patients. Her qualitative interviews revealed recurring emotional patterns that shaped the five stages. This empirical foundation adds a practical dimension to the psychological theories underpinning the model. Kübler-Ross integrated these findings with her theoretical insights, creating a scientifically informed and emotionally resonant framework.[27]

The Sociological Foundations of the Kübler-Ross Model

The Kübler-Ross model is widely recognized as a psychological framework for understanding grief and loss. However, the model is also deeply rooted in sociological perspectives, reflecting the interplay between individual experiences and broader social structures. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's observations of terminally ill patients and their interactions with caregivers and society highlight the social dimensions of grief, including cultural attitudes toward death, the medicalization of dying, and the role of social support systems.

[26] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 50-51.

[27] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 38.

Death Denial in Western Culture

One of the key sociological foundations of the Kübler-Ross model is the concept of death denial in Western societies. Kübler-Ross observed that many healthcare systems and families avoided discussing death, leaving terminally ill patients feeling isolated. Sociologist Philippe Ariès, in his seminal work *Western Attitudes Toward Death*, described how modern Western culture shifted from a communal and open acceptance of death to a more private and medicalized approach.[28] This cultural reluctance to confront mortality created a need for frameworks like the Kübler-Ross model, which encouraged open conversations about death and dying.

Kübler-Ross's advocacy for empathetic communication challenged societal norms that treated death as taboo. By introducing her five stages of grief, she highlighted patients' emotional needs and encouraged a shift toward a more humane approach in healthcare and family settings.[29] This aligns with the sociological critique of modernity, which emphasizes individuals' alienation from natural life processes, including death.

Medicalization of Death

The medicalization of death is another significant sociological foundation of the Kübler-Ross model. In modern healthcare systems, death has increasingly been managed by medical professionals in clinical settings, often leading to a focus on physical

[28] Philippe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 85-92.

[29] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 11-13.

symptoms rather than emotional or social needs. Ivan Illich, in *Limits to Medicine,* critiqued this medicalization, arguing that it removed death from the personal and communal spheres, transforming it into a technical problem to be solved.[30]

Kübler-Ross's work emerged from her experience with hospital patients. There, she observed how the institutionalization of death often neglected the emotional well-being of dying individuals. Her model served as a counterbalance to this trend, advocating for holistic care that addressed not only the physical but also the emotional and social aspects of dying.[31] By emphasizing patients' psychological and relational needs, she contributed to the broader sociological movement toward hospice care and palliative medicine, which seek to humanize the dying process.

Social Roles and the Experience of Grief

The Kübler-Ross model also reflects sociological theories about the disruption of social roles and identity during grief. Sociologist Erving Goffman's concept of role theory suggests that individuals navigate life through defined roles, such as parent, spouse, or professional. The loss of a loved one often disrupts these roles, forcing individuals to reconstruct their social identities.[32]

For example, the denial stage can be seen as a temporary refusal to accept losing a social role. In contrast, the acceptance stage involves reintegrating one's identity within a

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[30] Ivan Illich, *Limits to Medicine: Medical Nemesis, the Expropriation of Health* (New York, NY: Marion Boyars, 1976), 36-40.

[31] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 14-16.

[32] Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday 1959), 47-49.

new social framework. Kübler-Ross's model implicitly recognizes these social dynamics, providing a structure for understanding how individuals adjust to changes in their relational roles and social environments.[33]

Social Support and Role Theory

Sociologically, grief involves a change in social roles and identity. When someone dies, the bereaved often undergo shifts in their social roles (e.g., moving from spouse to widow), which can create both personal and social disruption. Kübler-Ross's stages acknowledge the adjustments people make in response to loss, implicitly recognizing the role transitions that are part of the grieving process.[34] The support from family, friends, and religious communities provides a social framework to navigate these transitions, making social support networks crucial for recovery.

Rituals and Mourning Practices

Sociologists note that cultural and religious rituals surrounding death serve an important function in helping individuals process grief. Kübler-Ross's model does not directly address rituals, but her acknowledgment of acceptance and the possibility of resolution resonates with the purpose of rituals in giving individuals a structure for closure. These rituals vary widely across cultures, but they provide an organized

[33] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 72-74.

[34] Jonathan Turner, *The Structure of Sociologist Theory* (Homewood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1978), 35-38.

social space for grief, illustrating how mourning is as much a social as an individual experience.[35]

Kubler-Ross's model has been widely applied in healthcare and counseling to support individuals coping with terminal illness, bereavement, and significant life changes. The model has had an impact on patient-centered care and empathy in terminal illnesses. In healthcare settings, the Kübler-Ross model helps medical professionals empathize with patients facing terminal illness by providing a framework for understanding their emotional responses. Knowing the stages allows physicians, nurses, and palliative care providers to recognize common reactions to terminal diagnoses, fostering a more compassionate approach to patient care.[36] By anticipating patients' potential anger or depression, healthcare providers can adapt their communication styles, fostering better patient-provider relationships.[37] Healthcare professionals have also learned to utilize this model in end-of-life and palliative care.

Understanding the stages of grief helps palliative caregivers provide support tailored to each patient's unique emotional needs, whether they are in denial, bargaining, or acceptance.[38] This model helps healthcare professionals address dying patients' physical and emotional needs, thus promoting holistic care.

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[35] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1912), 463.

[36] Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 50-52.

[37] Kenneth Doka, *Disenfranchised Grief: New Directions, Challenges, and Strategies for Practice* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 2002), 42.

[38] Robert Kastenbaum, *Death, Society, and Human Experience* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 310-313.

The Kübler-Ross model is not just used to help patients; it is also applied to support the families of terminal patients. Recognizing that families go through stages like those of patients helps healthcare teams provide relevant resources and support to family members. The model aids professionals in offering timely interventions, such as counseling or support groups, to help family members cope with anticipatory grief.[39]

In the field of counseling, the Kübler-Ross model serves as a foundation for grief counseling, where therapists work with clients who have experienced loss. Counselors use the model to help clients understand their emotions as normal responses to loss, reducing feelings of guilt or confusion. This structure allows clients to identify their current stage and work through each phase with guidance, helping them eventually reach acceptance.[40]

The model is also used in counseling clients experiencing non-death losses, such as divorce, job loss, or major life transitions. Counselors can validate their feelings and guide them through the healing process by helping clients see that their reactions are like those who have lost loved ones.[41] This broader application of the Kübler-Ross model has proven valuable in settings such as career counseling, family counseling, and trauma recovery.

The Kübler-Ross model, while influential, has faced substantial critique and adaptation over the years, particularly concerning its linearity, applicability across

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[39] Therese Rando, *Grief, Dying, and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers* (Champaign, IL: Research Press, 1984), 27-30.

[40] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, 46-47.

[41] Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy,* 60.

different types of loss, and cultural limitations. Scholars and practitioners have expanded and evolved the model to address these critiques, adapting it to be more flexible and inclusive.

One of the most common critiques is that the model implies a rigid, sequential progression through stages, which does not reflect the complexity of individual grief experiences. Researchers such as Bonanno argue that grief is often non-linear, with individuals moving back and forth between different emotions rather than progressing through set stages.[42] Modern grief theories often emphasize that grief is more cyclical and personalized rather than a fixed sequence.

The Kübler-Ross model is often criticized for being culturally specific to Western views of death and individualism. Different cultures have unique mourning practices and beliefs about death, which do not always align with the model's stages. As such, some scholars argue that the model does not adequately address non-Western or collectivist cultural perspectives on grief and loss.[43]

Conclusion

The mission of the church extends far beyond Sunday morning praise and worship. While many churches excel in delivering powerful worship experiences and well-crafted sermons, the ministry is truly defined by what happens throughout the week—meeting the holistic needs of individuals and communities. This discussion has

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[42] George Bonanno, *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2009), 25-28.

[43] Paul Rosenblatt, *A Social Constructionist Perspective on Cultural Differences in Grieving* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2001), 45-47.

highlighted the necessity for churches to transition from a singularly spirit-focused approach to ministry toward a more comprehensive and holistic model. Such an approach acknowledges that human beings are not merely spiritual but also mental, emotional, and physical beings. Addressing these dimensions is essential to fulfilling the church's mission of discipleship and offering transformative ministry.

Holistic ministry seeks to integrate the spiritual with the physical, emotional, and relational, embedding the gospel in every aspect of life. It emphasizes the importance of equipping believers with the tools to navigate life's challenges while fostering meaningful relationships, building strong families, and developing good character. By doing so, churches can demonstrate God's transformative love in a tangible and restorative way. This approach is particularly critical when ministering to those experiencing grief. As Jesus declares in Matthew 5:4, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This promise underscores the church's responsibility to provide strength and fortification to those who grieve, helping them find recovery and healing through God's love.

The church's role in grief support is rooted in scripture, historical, and theological foundations. The historical experience of grief, as seen through the Transatlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage, highlights the devastating impact of loss on identity, community, and family. These historical reflections remind the modern church of its calling to address grief as both a personal and communal experience. Theologically, Communal Theology, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasizes, reinforces the importance of bearing one another's burdens and cultivating mutual care within the Christian

community. Bonhoeffer's ideas of shared sacrifice and mutual support provide a framework for the church to create and sustain a grief recovery ministry.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's Five Stages of Grief offers another crucial resource for the church in understanding and ministering to those experiencing loss. While initially developed for terminally ill patients, this model has broad applicability to various forms of grief and loss. By integrating the psychological insights of the Five Stages of Grief with spiritual principles, churches can more effectively minister to grieving individuals. For example, recognizing stages such as denial or anger as part of a natural grieving process allows the church to offer empathy, patience, and tailored support. This understanding not only fosters healing for individuals but also strengthens the overall health of the congregation.

A healthy congregation is vital for church growth and outreach. As noted, "The people of God cannot reach out effectively if they are hurting."[44] Grief, when left unaddressed, can undermine a community's emotional and spiritual health. Conversely, a church that prioritizes grief recovery and holistic ministry becomes a beacon of hope, providing the support and resources needed for individuals to heal and thrive. Such a church is better equipped to fulfill its mission of making disciples and transforming lives.

The psychological and sociological foundations of the Kübler-Ross model further enhance the church's ability to minister effectively. From psychoanalytic theories of attachment and mourning to sociological insights about the role of rituals and social support in grief, these perspectives deepen the church's understanding of the grieving

[44] Sider, Olson, and Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference,* 167.

process. They also challenge the church to move beyond culturally specific or narrowly defined approaches to grief support, encouraging sensitivity to diverse experiences and practices.

Ultimately, this discussion calls for the church to embrace a new paradigm of ministry—one that is holistic, inclusive, and transformative. By embedding the gospel in every aspect of life and addressing the full range of human needs, the church can truly live out its calling to be the hands and feet of Christ in a hurting world. A grief recovery and support ministry is not merely a program but a reflection of the church's commitment to embodying God's love and providing comfort to those who mourn. As the church embraces this mission, it will foster healing within its walls and extend hope and restoration to the broader community.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Introduction

The mission of the church extends far beyond Sunday morning praise and worship. While many churches excel in delivering powerful worship experiences and well-crafted sermons, the ministry is truly defined by what happens throughout the week—meeting the holistic needs of individuals and communities. This discussion has highlighted the necessity for churches to transition from a singularly spirit-focused approach to ministry to a more comprehensive, holistic model. Such an approach acknowledges that human beings are not merely spiritual but also mental, emotional, and physical beings. Addressing these dimensions is essential to fulfilling the church's mission of discipleship and to offering transformative ministry within a healthy church.

A healthy congregation is vital for church growth and outreach. As noted, "The people of God cannot reach out effectively if they are hurting."[1] Grief, when left unaddressed, can undermine a community's emotional and spiritual health. Conversely, a church that prioritizes grief recovery and holistic ministry becomes a beacon of hope, providing the support and resources individuals need to heal and thrive. Such a church is better equipped to fulfill its mission of making disciples and transforming lives.

[1] Sider, Olson, and Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference,* 167.

For several years, the members of Sandy Ridge A.M.E. Zion Church in Landis, North Carolina, have experienced an unrelenting wave of loss. The congregation has been shaken by the deaths of beloved family members, long-standing leaders, and friends whose absence is still deeply felt. These compounded griefs have left spiritual residue in the hearts of many faithful members and, in many ways, have weakened the vitality of ministry. As one who has personally wrestled with grief, both as a son and as a pastor, I have come to understand that grief unaddressed can hinder ministry, but grief engaged can become the ground from which new ministry is born.

When my father suddenly passed away in 2018, my life was severely impacted. As a pastor, I had done what, at the time, I considered my best to help others navigate the sea of grief. This was the first time that I had to sail this sea myself. What I discovered was that there was nothing in place to minister to me in my time of need effectively. I found myself having to deal with my grief alone.

The Bible reminds us that, "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." This divine assurance is not only a word of comfort but also a call to community. Healing from grief was never intended to occur in isolation; it is meant to unfold within the fellowship of believers. This truth forms the theological heartbeat of my project and the core of what this entire journey has been preparing me to do—create spaces where the brokenhearted can find hope, and where the grieving can rediscover purpose through the presence of Christ and the people of God.

This project emerged organically from the pastoral rhythms of ministry. Shortly after my appointment to Sandy Ridge, I led a book study on *Autopsy of a Deceased Church* by Thom Rainer. One evening, what began as a discussion on church

revitalization turned into a sacred moment of vulnerability. Members began sharing their stories of loss—spouses, parents, and children whose deaths still weighed heavily upon them. There were tears, silence, and then a collective realization: our church needed a ministry of healing. That night, the seed for this project was planted.

It is clearly illuminated throughout the Bible that the God who calls us also forms us through experience, suffering, and service. Every faithful journey in ministry is a tapestry woven with divine intention, where education, knowledge, and encounter intersect to reveal purpose. The formation gained through the Doctor of Ministry program at United Theological Seminary has been such a tapestry for me. Each course, each paper, and each reflection has shaped not only what I know but who I am as a pastor, preacher, and servant-leader in the body of Christ.

It is from this rich soil of theological study, pastoral reflection, and contextual engagement that this final project was born. The project entitled "Empowering the Church for Healing: A Workshop Model for Grief Ministry Development" is the natural outgrowth of the synergy between what I have learned and what I have lived. It represents the intentional integration of the spiritual, intellectual, and practical dimensions of ministry that this program has cultivated.

Methodology

The project entitled "Empowering the Church for Healing: A Workshop Model for Grief Ministry Development" is grounded in research developed from a biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary perspective. The goal is to help members of this context feel more equipped to create and sustain a grief support and recovery

ministry. The basis for the implementation of this project has been established through biblical, historical, theological, and interdisciplinary foundations.

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of a grief support and recovery training workshop in equipping lay ministry participants at the Sandy Ridge church context. The study examined the transformative potential of a six-session workshop model conducted at Sandy Ridge AME Zion Church in Landis, North Carolina. A total of seven participants completed the whole workshop experience and contributed data through pre- and post-surveys, semi-structured interviews, and weekly journaling reflections.

Participants were recruited through pastoral invitation. They were notified four weeks before the beginning of the project via email. The email included an invitation to participate in a final project for my doctoral degree. It also indicated the dates and locations of the sessions. The participants self-identified as African American adults who are active members of Sandy Ridge. The participants' ages ranged from the mid-thirties to the late seventies, reflecting a multi-generational cross-section of church leadership and engaged congregants. Most participants had prior exposure to grief through personal loss experiences, caregiving responsibilities, and/or historical trauma within the broader community. Participants also represented a range of ministry involvement—including worship ministry, lay leadership, church administrative support, and community relational support roles. This diverse set of life experiences and ministry backgrounds provided a rich qualitative foundation for analysis and strengthened the credibility of the findings on training outcomes. No prior counseling or professional training in grief care was required, as the workshop was designed to equip ordinary believers for extraordinary

ministry. All participants completed the full workshop sequence sessions and all data collection components.

The intervention to effect change was delivered through an eight-week workshop. Each weekly session lasted approximately ninety minutes and combined biblical teaching, theological reflection, psychological frameworks, and communal practice exercises.

The workshop sought to foster transformation through three integrated modes:

Biblical and Theological Instruction – grounding participants in the theological rationale for grief ministry through Scripture, Communal Theology, and historical witness within the Black Church tradition.

Psychological and Emotional Skill Development – applying interdisciplinary models such as Kübler-Ross' stages of grief, Wroden's tasks of mourning, and emotional regulation strategies within a faith framework.

Practical Ministry Formation – small-group discussion, scenario practice, and reflective journaling were used to translate insight into ministry action.

The goal was to equip participants to move from awareness to activation—that is, from understanding grief theologically to responding compassionately and competently in ministry practice. The workshop sessions were conducted in person. The sessions for the workshop were as follows.

Session One

Introduction Session Pre-Workshop Questionnaires
Introductions/Project Overview

Session Two

Review Project Overview
Biblical Foundation

Session Three

Review Biblical Foundation
Historical Foundation

Session Four

Review Biblical Foundation
Theological Foundation

Session Five

Review Theological Foundation
Interdisciplinary Foundation

Session Six

Review Interdisciplinary Foundation
Psychological and Emotional Impacts of Grief

Session Seven

Importance of Active Listening and Empathetic Communication
Outline the Structure and Goals of Grief Support Ministry

Session Eight

Develop a Ministry Plan
Next Steps
Post Workshop Questionnaire
Journal Collection

Data for this project were gathered using a mixed qualitative methodology incorporating pre- and post-training surveys, semi-structured interviews, and participant journal reflections. Each method was purposefully selected to capture the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of readiness for ministry engagement within the context of grief support and recovery.

Pre- and post-workshop surveys were designed to assess participants' initial and subsequent levels of understanding, confidence, and ministry readiness regarding grief support. The surveys included items aligned to three constructs: Cognitive Readiness, Emotional Readiness, and Behavioral Readiness. The responses provided measurable indicators of change, while open-ended questions allowed participants to elaborate on their experiences.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the workshop series to explore participants' experiences in greater depth. The interviews allowed for narrative expression and personal reflection on how the sessions influenced their thinking, emotions, and ministry behavior. Each interview was transcribed and coded using the same three thematic constructs as the surveys.

Weekly journal entries were incorporated as a reflective learning tool and a third triangulation point. Participants completed short written reflections at the conclusion of each weekly session (Sessions two through six), responding to prompts that encouraged integration of the workshop content with personal faith, emotional growth, and

ministry practice.

Implementation

Before the project implementation, individual meetings were held with each professional associate. Each professional associate was made fully aware of the project's breadth and scope. The three professional associates were strategically selected for their expertise in pedagogy, doctoral experience, and data analysis. The meetings began with a discussion of the essence of the Spiritual Autobiography and ended with the Project Proposal. Valuable insights were provided on participant recruitment, the most effective teaching format, the proper timing of the participant interview sessions, and how the data should be analyzed.

Four weeks before the workshop sessions began, an invitation to attend the first session was emailed to seven selected participants. Once confirmation was received, the participants were sent the pre-workshop survey to complete. The first session was held on June 21, 2025, in the church conference room following the morning worship service. All the invited participants attended. Each participant received a folder. The folder contained an Informed Consent Form and a Session Agenda. The seasonal agenda included all eight sessions. The discussion at this session centered around holistic ministry in our context. It was agreed that part of being holistic means caring for the emotions and psychological health of the membership. It was determined that creating a grief support and recovery ministry would be a tremendous asset, and each participant expressed interest in being part of this ministry. It was agreed that the next session would begin on June 23, 2025, at

7:00 p.m. in the church fellowship hall. At the conclusion of this meeting, each participant was given a composition notebook in which to record their journal entries. The participants were instructed to keep their composition notebooks until the last session.

Session Two was held on Monday, June 23, 2025, at the Sandy Ridge Fellowship Hall. All seven participants were present. After some initial discussion, it was decided to move the meeting spot to the main conference room. This remained the setting throughout the workshop. This session explored the theological, historical, and ministerial significance of Matthew 5:4—"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"—as part of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. It places the Beatitude within the broader Gospel of Matthew, examines the meaning of mourning and comfort through biblical interpretation, and connects these insights to contemporary grief ministry within the church.

The session began by establishing the context and purpose of Matthew's Gospel. As a text written to a predominantly Jewish-Christian audience, Matthew emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and as the authoritative teacher whose ministry parallels that of Moses. This background is essential for understanding the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5–7), where Jesus solidifies the values of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Beatitudes introduce this sermon by presenting a radically countercultural understanding of who is considered "blessed." Instead of celebrating power, wealth, or social prestige, Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted, and, in Matthew 5:4, those who mourn.

A lively debate took place on how to define mourning. Historically, Christian interpreters have seen it as various things: mourning personal sins, grieving the loss of loved ones, and lamenting societal injustice. These perspectives demonstrate that mourning is not a single, uniform experience but a complex human reaction to loss, brokenness, and unfulfilled longing.

The final portion of the session focused on the practical implications for contemporary ministry. Jesus' blessing on mourners reveals a theological inversion of worldly values: in God's kingdom, vulnerability is not a deficit but a doorway to grace. The comfort God provides includes strength for the journey, solidarity in suffering, and the hope of resurrection. Such comfort is not escapism but empowerment—helping individuals face their grief with the assurance of God's presence. The lesson draws from biblical narratives such as the widow of Nain (Lk. 7:11–17) and Jairus' daughter (Mk. 5:21–43), demonstrating that Jesus consistently responds to grief with compassion, presence, and restorative action. No session was held during the week of July 4, 2025.

On Monday, July 14, 2025, the workshop resumed with the Third Session, "Faith, Grief, Resilience, and the Black Historical Experience." This session was designed to establish the historical foundation of the project by situating contemporary experiences of grief within the broader narrative of African American suffering, resistance, and communal healing. After greetings and a brief orientation, participants were instructed to take note cards and write their first and last names on them. This activity served as an entry point for discussing the significance of names in personal and communal identity.

The session opened with the guiding questions, "What's in a name?" and "How important is your name?"—prompts that invited participants to reflect on the meanings,

histories, and emotional weight of their names. The facilitator set the tone by offering a personal anecdote in which his father taught that a person's name is their most unassailable possession. This story underscored the ways names function as markers of identity, continuity, and legacy. Participants responded by sharing their own stories, revealing how deeply names connect to belonging, ancestry, and memory.

The conversation transitioned into a broader reflection on the historical trauma endured during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, providing vivid accounts of the horrors that shaped the collective memory of African descendants. Participants discussed how enslaved Africans were chained side-by-side—sometimes to the deceased—confined in filth, deprived of agency, and forced into unimaginable conditions. These descriptions highlighted not only the physical brutality of enslavement but also the profound psychological grief, including the loss of family, culture, community, and self-determination. Parallels were drawn between the suffering of the enslaved and the crucifixion of Christ, with some noting that enslaved people endured their own form of "crucifixion," both literally and symbolically.

The group acknowledged the long-term psychological repercussions of such trauma, including what would now be identified as PTSD, depression, and chronic anxiety. No individual or community emerged from these ordeals untouched. Yet, even in the absence of institutional religious structures, African Americans cultivated clandestine or "invisible churches"—secret gatherings where enslaved people combined diverse oral traditions, spiritual practices, and faith expressions into a shared worship experience.

Within these hidden spaces, the biblical Exodus narrative (Ex. 3:7–10) emerged as a foundational story of hope, liberation, and divine solidarity. Oral storytelling,

communal singing, rhythmic prayer, and embodied worship allowed grieving individuals to process emotions collectively. These practices became essential mechanisms for resilience and survival, offering both spiritual sustenance and psychological relief amid pervasive suffering.

The session concluded with a critique of the contemporary church, noting that many modern congregations have drifted from the communal ethic of bearing one another's burdens—an ethic that historically sustained Black communities through generations of trauma. Participants emphasized that reclaiming this communal responsibility is not merely a theological mandate but a necessary component of healing, resilience, and faithful ministry. The church held Vacation Bible School on the week of July 23, 2025; therefore, there was no session held.

Session Four was held on July 29, 2025. "Building Trust and Community in Grieving Together" was the title of this session. The group engaged in a rich discussion around the dynamics of grieving in isolation versus grieving within a community, reflecting on personal experiences and the theological implications of each. Many participants shared that they were accustomed to grieving alone—sometimes as a matter of temperament and sometimes because childhood experiences had conditioned them to internalize emotional pain. While several acknowledged that solitary grieving can feel safer or more controllable, there was widespread recognition that choosing to grieve alone is fundamentally different from being forced into isolation because of the absence of a supportive community. Participants agreed that trusting others enough to share grief is profoundly challenging, yet ultimately valuable and necessary for healing.

The group considered Galatians 6:2 ("Bear one another's burdens") as a theological cornerstone for communal grieving. This verse served as a reminder that Christian discipleship is not intended to be lived in isolation; instead, believers are called to support one another through seasons of suffering. The discussion affirmed that genuine Christian community functions as a space where burdens are shared, grief is honored, and individuals are not left to navigate loss alone. Participants contrasted this biblical vision with the reality that many modern church communities often fail to provide consistent, tangible support beyond immediate crises.

The importance of testimony emerged as another significant theme. Participants reflected on the longstanding Christian practice of sharing testimonies—stories of how God has moved in a person's life, even in seasons of loss—as a source of communal strength. These narratives reinforce faith, cultivate empathy, and remind the community of God's sustaining presence. Paul's metaphor of the Church as a body with many parts was raised as an illustration of the Christian walk as inherently communal, with diverse members equipped with different gifts, yet unified in purpose and mutual dependence.

Several theoretical frameworks further enriched the conversation. William Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning provided a psychological lens through which participants could understand the active nature of grieving. Worden's model—accepting the reality of the loss, processing the pain, adjusting to a world without the deceased, and reconnecting with others—resonated deeply with the group. Many noted that these tasks become significantly more difficult when undertaken in isolation. Busy ministry responsibilities, family pressures, and emotional exhaustion can all impede the ability to process grief effectively, making communal support and therapeutic intervention vital.

The group also engaged with Nicholas Wolterstorff's reflections on grief**,** particularly his insight that grief is simultaneously "the pain of the no longer" and "part of the joy of what once was." Participants found this paradox compelling, as it validated the deep sorrow of loss while also affirming the enduring significance of cherished memories. This theological perspective allowed them to see grief not as an interruption to faith but as an expression of profound love.

Communal Theology, especially as articulated by Dietrich Bonhoeffer**,** provided yet another theological framework for reflection. Bonhoeffer's insistence that Christian life must be lived in community—and that believers are responsible for bearing one another's burdens—challenged participants to imagine a more robust and long-term practice of communal care. Bonhoeffer's description of life in the Confessing Church seminary, marked by shared living, mutual confession, and ongoing spiritual support, was discussed as a practical model for contemporary churches to adapt to strengthen their own communal bonds.

Despite the theological and psychological affirmations for community-based grieving, participants identified several barriers that hinder the formation of authentic support networks. Trust issues emerged as a primary obstacle. Many expressed fear of vulnerability, potential judgment, or gossip within church settings. They noted that trust cannot be forced; it must be built gradually through consistent presence, integrity, and relational care. Additionally, participants acknowledged the influence of modern individualism**,** which often encourages self-sufficiency and limits engagement beyond the weekly worship service. This cultural hesitancy to share life beyond Sunday mornings undermines the communal ideals central to both Scripture and Black church tradition.

Considering these barriers, the group offered several suggestions for cultivating stronger communal support. They emphasized the need for ongoing, consistent communication**,** including simple acts of reaching out, being present, and listening attentively. Participants noted that it is essential to let individuals know that support is available without pressuring them to engage before they are ready. Finally, they advocated for structured and sustained forms of support**—**such as regular check-ins, grief support groups, and pastoral follow-up—that move the church beyond episodic or crisis-driven care toward a more enduring model of shared life and mutual burden-bearing.

Session Five took place on August 5, 2025. This session provided an integrated exploration of the interdisciplinary foundations necessary for developing an adequate grief support and recovery ministry within the local church. Recognizing that human beings are complex and multidimensional—spiritual, emotional, mental, physical, and social—this session emphasized the need for churches to adopt a holistic approach to ministry. The issue discusses that many congregations excel in worship practices yet struggle to meet the deeper pastoral and emotional needs of members who experience grief, loss, and trauma. For a grief ministry to be effective, it must be rooted not only in biblical and theological principles but also in psychological, sociological, and historical understandings of how grief functions in human life.

There was an in-depth discussion of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's work and her Five Stages of Grief model. The session highlighted that while Kübler-Ross's model is not linear or universal, it remains a valuable framework for understanding the emotional complexity of grief and for guiding compassionate pastoral responses.

The sociological dimensions of grief were also examined, emphasizing how cultural norms, social roles, and communal practices shape the grieving experience. The session moved to explore Western society's tendency toward death denial and the medicalization of dying, both of which contribute to social isolation for those experiencing grief. Further, it draws on role theory and the significance of social support to show how grief disrupts identity, relationships, and communal belonging. Rituals, mourning practices, and the presence of supportive communities are identified as crucial components of healing, reinforcing the church's role as a place where grief can be acknowledged, shared, and transformed.

Integrating these interdisciplinary perspectives, the session emphasized that effective grief ministry must be multifaceted. It should combine biblical compassion, theological understanding, psychological knowledge, sociological awareness, and historical context. The church holds a special role in exemplifying the comfort Jesus speaks of in Matthew 5:4, but this is only possible if it acknowledges grief as a complex, multifaceted experience that goes beyond mere spiritual platitudes. Through a holistic approach, empathetic presence, and well-informed pastoral care, the church can foster healing environments where individuals and communities gain strength, find restoration, and experience hope.

The Sixth Session was held on August 12, 2025. The session, "Healing Family Grief Through Faith and Forgiveness," also surfaced significant reflections on the complexities of interpersonal conflict during seasons of grief. One participant recounted ongoing strife with a family member following the death of a loved one. The tension centered around repeated accusations and emotional attacks, including being unjustly

blamed with statements such as, “You killed her.” These confrontations occurred both privately, by phone, and publicly, in the presence of others. The conflict had escalated to the point where legal threats were made against the hospital, which participants interpreted as outward expressions of unresolved grief and displaced anger. The emotional turmoil was further intensified by the intricate dynamics of family relationships, particularly as the situation affected children and other vulnerable relatives.

The group demonstrated empathy as they acknowledged that both individuals involved were grieving deeply, though they expressed and processed their grief in dramatically different ways. Participants noted that anger, blame, and projection often function as coping mechanisms for individuals who struggle to confront their own pain. Recognizing this helped the group frame the conflict not merely as hostility, but as a manifestation of anguish and loss.

Yet the discussion also highlighted the difficulty of being the target of another person’s grief-driven anger. The participant described the emotional strain of simultaneously grieving a personal loss while being subjected to verbal attacks and accusations. Others affirmed the profound challenge of responding with patience, compassion, and restraint in the face of such hostility, acknowledging that the human impulse is often to retaliate. The group encouraged a Christian posture grounded in prayer, patience, and forgiveness—emphasizing that more profound insight into another person’s suffering places a greater responsibility on the believer to respond with compassion rather than retaliation.

At the same time, participants stressed the necessity of maintaining healthy boundaries. They affirmed that one can uphold compassion and prayer for the other

person while also protecting one's own mental and emotional well-being. Several noted that emotional or physical distance may be needed when conflict becomes repetitive or harmful, and that such distance does not negate spiritual care, forgiveness, or the hope of eventual reconciliation.

Another participant shared experiences of deep personal guilt connected to not being physically present at the exact moment a loved one passed away, despite a history of faithful support and caregiving. The individual expressed anguish over not holding the loved one's hand in their final moments, revealing a persistent need to visit the cemetery as a way of seeking forgiveness. Others in the group responded with empathy, offering similar stories—including having missed a loved one's final breath by only minutes. These shared narratives helped frame the experience not as failure, but as a common and often unavoidable reality of death.

Participants further discussed the possibility that some individuals choose to die alone, whether due to personality, privacy, or a desire to spare family members' additional distress. This perspective helped some reframe their guilt and consider that their absence may not have been a failure but part of the loved one's final act of agency or compassion. The conversation affirmed that expressing guilt or sorrow openly is itself a meaningful step toward healing. Several participants noted that articulating one's grief does not imply readiness to "let go," nor does it suggest a linear progression through mourning. Instead, the group recognized grief as deeply personal, unpredictable, and without a fixed timeline. Only the individual—guided by faith and the presence of God—determines when they are ready to move through the tasks and transformations of mourning.

Pastoral and peer support emerged as vital elements of this process. Participants encouraged one another with reminders of God's abiding presence and ability to bring healing over time. Statements such as "sometimes, there are no words" were offered not as dismissals, but as affirmations of the depth of grief and the limitations of human comfort. The session concluded with a collective affirmation that all expressions of grief are valid and that the community remains committed to ongoing support, prayer, and accompaniment for those navigating the complexities of loss.

Session Seven took place on August 26, 2025. The session began with the leader expressing gratitude for the participants' patience and commitment throughout the journey of developing a comprehensive grief support ministry plan. The group was reminded that this meeting represented "the final coming together session in this mode," signaling a transition from exploratory learning to the formation of a structured ministry framework. The opening activity invited participants to recall a moment in their lives when they felt genuinely heard. This reflection surfaced emotions of freedom, relief, and being cared for—underscoring that feeling truly heard is not only memorable but transformative. The leader emphasized that making others feel genuinely cared for must remain a foundational principle of any grief support initiative.

The session revisited earlier discussions on why active, empathetic listening is central to adequate grief support, drawing from both biblical teachings and practical pastoral experience. Participants reflected on the distinction between empathy and sympathy. Empathy involves entering another's emotional world and being present without attempting to fix the situation. At the same time, sympathy tends to remain external, often resulting in platitudes that fail to connect with the person's lived

experience. The facilitator shared a workplace example from Wells Fargo, explaining how statements such as “I know how you feel” can minimize someone’s experience and trigger defensive responses. This reinforced the principle that effective grief care is grounded not in solutions, but in compassionate presence.

The group then examined phrases commonly offered in moments of grief that can inadvertently harm or invalidate. Statements such as “At least they lived a long life,” “You should move on,” “But you have so many memories,” or “God must have needed another angel” were identified as spiritually or emotionally counterproductive. Participants noted that these familiar expressions may stem from good intentions but fail to honor the depth of the individual’s pain. In contrast, the group practiced formulating empathetic statements such as “I can imagine how hard this must be for you,” “I’m here with you,” and “Take all the time you need.” They emphasized that sometimes the most faithful response is a silent presence—being with the grieving person without offering explanations or advice.

From here, listening was reframed not merely as a skill but as a spiritual gift and ministry. Participants affirmed that being listened to deeply can be life-giving for the grieving, providing both validation and sacred space for expressing sorrow.

The group then transitioned to identifying the core components of a sustainable grief support ministry. Several key goals emerged. First, the ministry must provide a safe space where individuals can share openly without fear of judgment. Second, the ministry should work toward normalizing grief by framing it as both a spiritual journey and a communal experience, reinforcing the principle that no one should grieve alone.

Third, participants highlighted the importance of resource connection, including partnerships with local counseling agencies, mental health professionals, and community organizations.

The group's proposed ministry components included peer support groups organized by demographic categories (men, women, and children), small groups with consistent meeting schedules, and a defined curriculum to guide participants through various stages of grief. The importance of reliable referral pathways to outside agencies was noted, especially when individuals require professional mental health support.

Participants acknowledged that grief manifests across a broad spectrum of experiences, extending beyond bereavement to include job loss, divorce, health changes, and significant life transitions. Ensuring the ministry's inclusivity was deemed essential. Special attention was given to children's grief, noting that children process loss differently and often internalize guilt, isolation, or confusion when left unsupported. Participants shared examples from their own work, including assembling grief resources for classmates of a grieving child and addressing the aftermath of a tragic sixth-grade suicide. These stories illustrated the long-term emotional impact grief can have on children, including avoidance behaviors and hesitation to speak the names of deceased loved ones. The group affirmed that addressing childhood grief must be intentional and developmentally sensitive

The leader introduced the PIMS model—Physical, Emotional, Mental, and Spiritual—as a holistic framework for understanding grief. Participants reflected on how grief touches each dimension and how support ministries must consider the whole person rather than focusing solely on emotional pain. Embedded within this discussion was a

reminder that hearing and listening are profoundly different acts. Active listening is what transforms hearing into supportive understanding.

The group explored the characteristics of active listening, including giving full attention, reflecting what has been shared, asking clarifying questions, and maintaining a non-judgmental posture. Drawing on "Handout #1: Skill Checklist," participants practiced skills such as maintaining eye contact, using open body language, paraphrasing accurately, asking clarifying questions, refraining from interrupting, and acknowledging underlying emotions beyond spoken words. They also discussed how body language, tone, and facial expressions influence the perception of care and respect.

A practical partner exercise helped participants apply these skills. Pairs took turns sharing their days while listeners practiced the active listening techniques. Many found the experience both illuminating and challenging. Some struggled with memory or resisted the urge to interject, clarify, or prepare their response. Others noted that the exercise helped manage hearing difficulties. Overall, participants affirmed the value of active listening as a learned skill that requires continual practice and intentionality.

The final session was held on September 2, 2025. During this session, participants were informed of several next steps designed to assess program impact and support continued ministry development. A post-experience survey—either electronic or print—will be distributed to all participants, mirroring the structure and content of the initial pre-survey. This instrument will enable comparison of pre- and post-program perspectives, measure growth in understanding, and provide qualitative feedback on the workshop experience. Participants are expected to complete and return the survey promptly.

Additionally, participants were reminded to finalize and submit their reflective journals for collection. These journals serve as an essential qualitative data source, offering insight into participants' personal processing of grief, their engagement with workshop content, and emerging themes relevant to ministry formation.

In preparation for the next phase of implementation, the leader emphasized the importance of building strategic partnerships with community counseling and support agencies. These partnerships will enhance the ministry's capacity to respond effectively to complex grief needs, ensure appropriate referral pathways, and provide professional support where pastoral care alone may not suffice. This step represents a critical bridge between congregational care and the broader network of mental health and social service resources.

The ministry planning process will also include developing or selecting a structured curriculum for grief support groups. This curriculum will guide small-group sessions, support consistency across facilitators, and offer evidence-informed tools appropriate for diverse forms of grief. Finally, the ministry will intentionally integrate physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual care—aligning with the PIMS framework—to ensure a holistic approach to support. This integrated model recognizes that grief affects the whole person and that effective ministry must respond to each dimension with compassion, intentionality, and theological grounding.

Summary of Learning

A total of seven adult participants took part in the eight-week grief support and recovery training workshop. All participants were active members of a Black church

context and completed every component of the data-collection process. The dataset includes pre-workshop and post-workshop surveys, weekly reflective journal entries covering Weeks Two through Six, and one semi-structured interview per participant. The journals and interviews were coded across three developmental constructs: Cognitive Readiness**,** Emotional Readiness, and Behavioral Readiness. Behavioral Readiness served as the primary outcome of interest.

All journal entries were assigned a numerical score from one to five, based on the degree to which participants demonstrated indicators of each construct. A score of one represented early-stage or minimal evidence of readiness, while a score of five represented a high degree of demonstrated proficiency or transfer of learning. Scores were averaged across all seven participants each week.

In examining the journal data, the weekly averages show consistent numerical progression across all three constructs from Week Two through Week Six. For Cognitive Readiness, the average increased from 1.5 in Week Two to 4.4 in Week Six. Emotional Readiness displayed a similar progression, beginning with an average of 1.4 in Week Two and rising to 4.3 in Week Six. Behavioral Readiness, the primary construct, began with a Week Two average of 1.3, gradually increasing to 4.35 by Week Six. Each week showed an incremental rise in the group average, with no downward movement across the construct scores.

The raw journal content that supported these numerical scores consisted of statements related to each form of readiness. Cognitive indicators commonly included references to new knowledge, concepts of grief, or theological ideas learned during the workshop sessions. Emotional indicators included participants' descriptions of their

feelings, emotional awareness, or moments of vulnerability. Behavioral indicators included descriptions of concrete actions taken, such as checking in on others, offering support, or applying practical skills introduced in the workshop. These excerpts were used only to support scoring and are not analyzed here.

Pre-Project and Post-Project Workshop

1. How would you define grief in your own words, and what kinds of life experiences do you believe can cause a person to grieve? Assesses general knowledge of grief concepts and breadth of understanding around types of loss.
2. What are some key terms or ideas you associate with the grieving process (e.g., mourning, bereavement, healing)? What do they mean to you? Measures familiarity with and interpretation of common grief-related terminology.
3. What do you believe are the most important things someone should do—or avoid doing—when supporting a person who is grieving? Evaluates attitudes toward helpful and harmful support practices; reveals empathy and emotional awareness.
4. How comfortable do you feel talking about grief, death, or loss with others? What thoughts or feelings come up for you when these conversations happen? Explores emotional comfort level and any fear or resistance; can show increased openness or emotional readiness post-workshop.
5. If someone you know was grieving the loss of a loved one, how would you approach offering them support? What would you say or do, and why? Explores practical application and perceived ability to provide meaningful support in real-life situations.

6. How prepared do you feel to contribute to a grief support ministry in your church? What skills or insights do you already have, and what areas do you feel you need to grow in? Assesses ministry-specific confidence and readiness; allows for comparison of self-perceived preparedness before and after the workshop.

Pre-workshop survey responses revealed that participants generally entered the workshop with limited knowledge of grief theory, low initial confidence in supporting grieving individuals, and little to no previous formal training in grief support. Participants also expressed uncertainty in how to initiate supportive conversations, identify grief-related behaviors, or engage grieving community members. However, nearly all participants expressed a strong motivation to learn and a desire to grow in their ability to minister to grieving individuals.

Post-workshop survey data indicated increases across the exact survey domains. Participants reported greater understanding of grief processes, an improved sense of readiness to serve in a grief ministry, and heightened confidence in supporting someone who is grieving. They also indicated a more precise grasp of confidentiality, boundaries, and the role of the church in grief support. These findings reflect only the data that was collected and do not include interpretation or conclusions.

1. How would you define grief in your own words, and what do you believe are the different ways people experience it? Assesses participants' conceptual understanding of grief, acknowledging emotional, physical, spiritual, and relational dimensions.

2. Can you describe some of the short-term and long-term effects grief can have on an individual's life? Evaluates awareness of grief's lasting impact and its emotional, psychological, and behavioral consequences.
3. In your opinion, what role do culture, faith, or personal background play in how someone grieves? Probes whether participants recognize grief as a complex, individualized process influenced by beliefs and life context.
4. What do you believe people need most when they are grieving? What kind of support is truly helpful? Uncovers participants' attitudes toward compassionate care and their assumptions about what grieving people need.
5. How prepared do you feel to support someone who is grieving—spiritually, emotionally, and practically? What would help you feel more equipped? Measures current confidence, training gaps, and perceived readiness for personal ministry engagement.
6. What would a healthy, effective grief support ministry look like in your church or community? Encourages participants to articulate a vision, structure, and goals for grief ministry, revealing clarity or uncertainty.
7. What challenges do you anticipate in starting and sustaining a grief support ministry, and what strengths do you bring to help overcome them? Gauges strategic thinking, leadership readiness, and practical understanding of ministry planning and teamwork.

The semi-structured interviews generated additional descriptive data. Participants provided their own definitions of grief, often framing grief as the emotional and spiritual response to various forms of loss, including death, failed relationships, long-term illness,

or estrangement. Interviewees described their personal experiences with grief, including childhood losses, family conflict, or moments that still trigger emotions. Participants emphasized the role of faith and the church as essential sources of support, strength, or community. When describing what people need during grief, participants most frequently mentioned presence, listening, empathy, confidentiality, and practical acts of kindness. When asked about the development of a grief support ministry, participants identified qualities such as empathy, confidentiality, accessibility, and training as essential to its success. They also named trust-building, consistency, and communication as primary needs in establishing an effective ministry.

Attendance and completion data demonstrate strong engagement with the workshop. All seven participants attended at least five sessions, and six participated in all six. All participants completed pre- and post-surveys, interviews, and journal entries for Weeks Two through Six, resulting in 100% completion rates for every data measure.

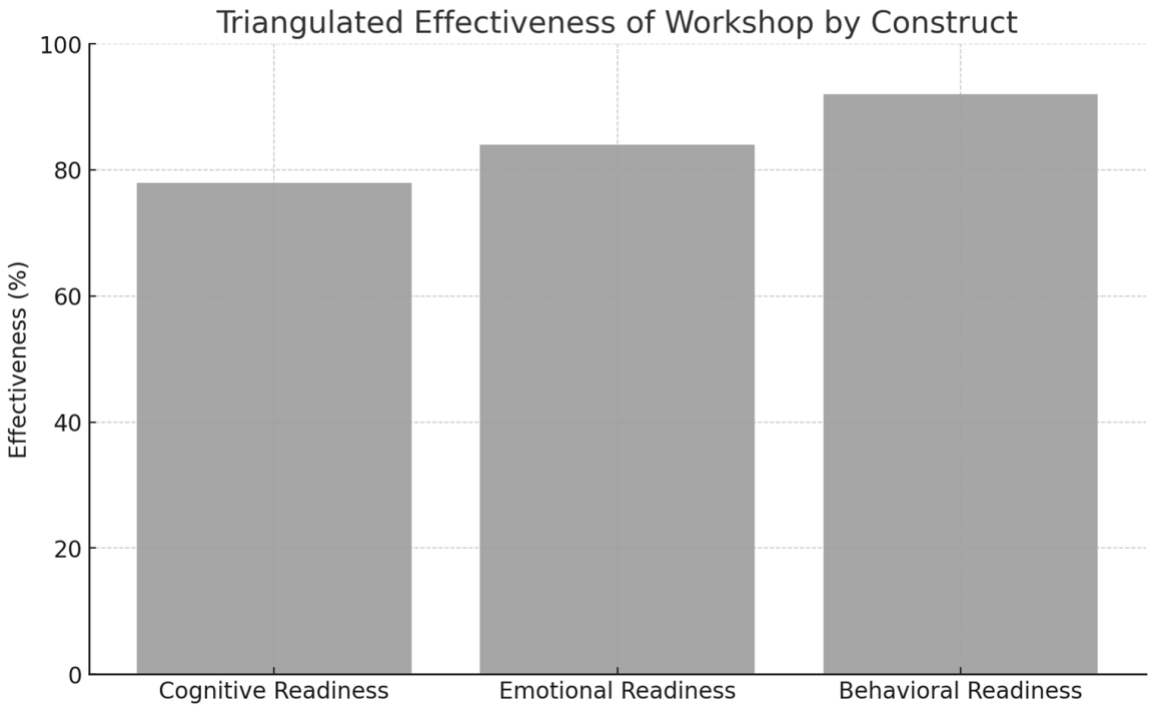
The cumulative score totals across all journal entries for all participants over the five weeks show the following: Cognitive Readiness totaled 98.7 points**,** Emotional Readiness totaled 94.4 points, and Behavioral Readiness totaled 93.65 points**.** Distribution tables across score ranges indicate that all participants began the workshop with scores in the 1.0–1.9 range across all constructs during Week Two. As the workshop progressed, participants moved into the 2.0–2.9 and 3.0–3.9 ranges, and by Week Six, all seven participants demonstrated scores within the 4.0–5.0 range for all constructs.

These data collectively provide a comprehensive presentation of participant engagement and weekly progression across cognitive, emotional, and behavioral indicators over the course of the workshop, without offering interpretation or

conclusions. The findings include all collected data sources—surveys, journals, interviews, attendance, and participant progression—and are presented here strictly as descriptive results.

Data Analysis

Results from this study demonstrate that the grief support and recovery formation workshops yielded significant positive developmental movement in all three domains measured: cognitive readiness, emotional readiness, and behavioral readiness. Aligning quantitative survey outcomes with qualitative interview and reflective journal data strengthens the validity of this conclusion. Participants demonstrated increased theological and historical understanding of grief, and increased internal capacity to name and process grief experiences. They increased readiness to function as care agents within a communal grief support context.



Cognitive readiness increased as participants acquired new language, frameworks, and interdisciplinary conceptual anchors to interpret grief. Pre-workshop responses indicated that participants initially framed grief primarily in personal, spiritual, or episodic terms. Post-workshop data indicate a shift toward perceiving grief as multifaceted, communal, historically embedded, and requiring multidisciplinary integration. Participants referenced frameworks from psychological, sociological, theological, and historical perspectives without prompting. This demonstrates that knowledge gains are translated into schema restructuring rather than simply memorized information.

Emotional readiness increased as participants described deeper internal access to their own grief material, increased tolerance for emotional discomfort, and increased empathy toward others experiencing loss. Journals revealed a progressive decrease in emotional avoidance, a redefinition of "grief strength" as presence rather than suppression, and emerging comfort with silence, lament, and non-fix-it-oriented ministry posture. Interview data further confirmed that participants not only intellectually understood grief differently—they felt safer engaging grief honestly and compassionately.

Behavioral readiness increased as participants expressed clarity on specific, actionable ways they could embody grief support within their church context. Participants shifted from passive observer identities into proactive ministry actors. The study data demonstrated that participants could now articulate next steps, roles, rhythms of follow-up care, and ongoing ministry structures that do not expire after funerals. This suggests

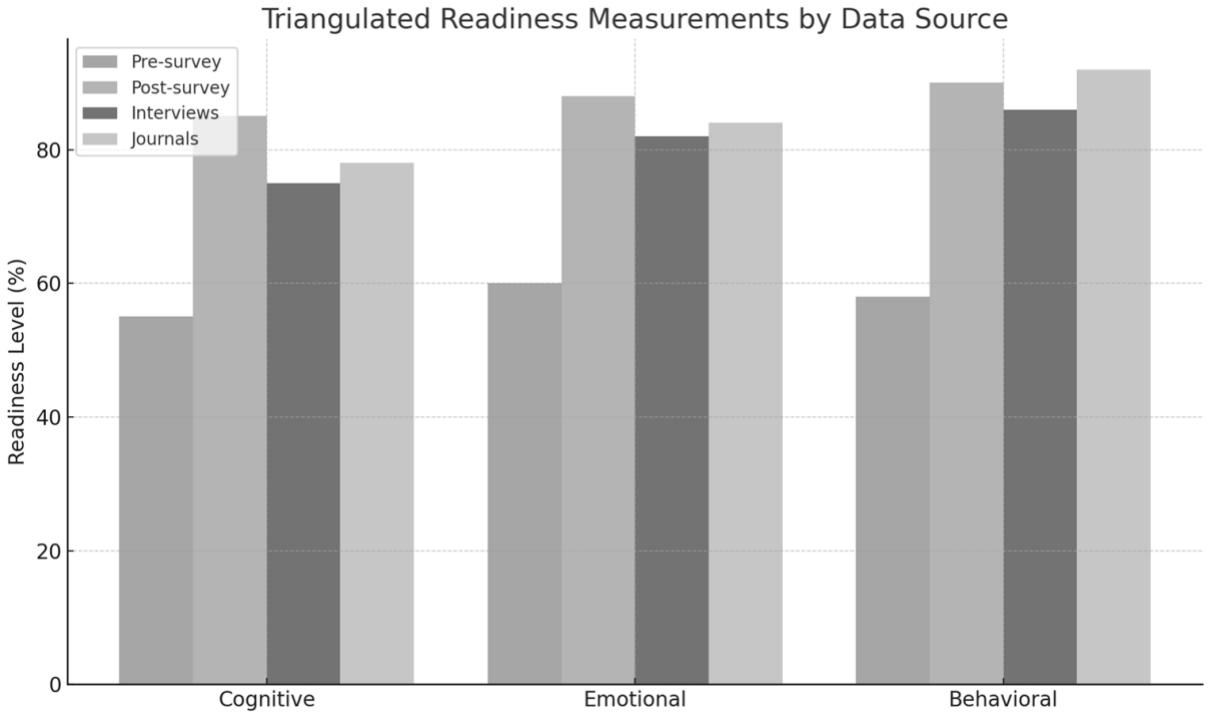
that the workshops did more than raise awareness—they produced a shift toward praxis-based ministerial identity.

Collectively, these findings provide evidence that the workshops did not merely improve knowledge but facilitated an integrated formation process. The convergence of survey scores, interview responses, and weekly journaling validates the effectiveness of the training model in equipping lay leaders to create and operate a grief support and recovery ministry.

Taken together, the triangulated data indicate that the grief formation workshops were practical in equipping participants cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally to develop a church-based grief support and recovery ministry. Participants demonstrated increased knowledge of interdisciplinary grief frameworks, greater emotional openness and capacity to engage lament without avoidance, and heightened readiness to implement sustained care practices within their congregational context. Therefore, the evidence supports the conclusion that this educational intervention successfully strengthened lay leaders' preparedness to initiate, maintain, and operationalize a grief support and recovery ministry within the local church.

Analysis of the triangulated data demonstrated clear and consistent growth across all three latent constructs—cognitive readiness, emotional readiness, and behavioral readiness. Quantitative increases from pre-survey to post-survey were supported and further strengthened by qualitative findings in interviews and weekly journal entries. Participants not only demonstrated improved conceptual knowledge of grief support and theological foundations (cognitive) but also evidenced increased capacity for emotional presence and empathic connection (emotional), and a measurable emergence of practiced

ministry behaviors (behavioral). The alignment between quantitative and qualitative data streams confirms that the workshop was effective in equipping participants with the core competencies necessary to initiate and sustain grief support and recovery ministry in a congregational context.



The triangulation graph visually displays the alignment of all three data streams—pre/post survey, semi-structured interviews, and weekly journal journals—across the same three latent constructs (cognitive readiness, emotional readiness, behavioral readiness). All three constructs demonstrate upward movement from pre- to post-assessment, with cognitive readiness showing the most prominent rise, followed by emotional readiness, and then behavioral readiness. The qualitative indicators (interviews + journals) are represented as converging movements that mirror the quantitative trend lines, revealing that participants not only reported gaining new knowledge (cognitive

shift), but they also expressed increased internal motivation to emotionally engage in grief (emotional shift), and then moved into taking embodied action steps toward future ministry service (behavioral shift). The graph demonstrates that growth was not isolated to one domain; rather, the formation was holistic, integrated, and progressive—validating that the workshops not only increase information, but they also increase capacity for ministry. Taken together, the triangulated data strongly indicate that: Participants grew intellectually, emotionally, and behaviorally; the workshop model effectively equips lay leaders for grief ministry; the Sandy Ridge Church context benefited from culturally aware, biblically grounded training, and participants are prepared to initiate the early stages of a sustainable grief support and recovery ministry.

This confirms that a structured, spiritually integrated program can meaningfully prepare congregants to serve in a compassionate, competent, and culturally relevant grief ministry.

Conclusion

This project confirmed a theological truth: healing happens when people are equipped to care for one another. When the church is empowered with knowledge, emotional capacity, and practical skills, it becomes again what it has historically been—a sanctuary of healing.

The eight-week workshop not only informed—it transformed. Participants not only learned—they became ready to lead. And where readiness exists, ministry can begin. This project revealed that grief support ministry is not merely needed; it is possible, sustainable, and spiritually aligned with the very identity of the Sandy Ridge

Church. There is still work to be done. A formal Grief Support and Recovery Ministry is viable and supported by participant readiness. Therefore, the church can take the next steps of implementing small group models, gender-specific support circles, post-funeral follow-up systems, and long-term care pathways. Continued training and refreshers will help sustain the ministry.

The calling of the church is not to avoid grief—but to accompany it. There is still work to be done. Through communal love, shared understanding, and intentional equipping, the church becomes God's healing place. This is the work of ministry. This is the calling of the Church.

This is the empowerment of the people of God—for the healing of the people of God.

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